The King with No Face

Jean Bazin

In L'Homme 2004/2 No 170 , pages 11 to 23
Publisher Éditions de l'EHESS

ISSN 0439-4216
ISBN 2713218314
DOI 10.4000/lhomme.24776
Uploaded: 06/01/2004

The King with No Face

Jean Bazin*

THIS ARTICLE by Jean Bazin stands midway between his early works on West Africa and his more recent works on anthropology in which they are developed. When he undertook his research during the 1960s and 1970s, the question of kingship occupied a central place in his thought. This was based on a case study he undertook—that of Segu, a town situated in the middle basin of the River Niger, and, from the beginning of the eighteenth century, the capital of a very powerful kingdom. For Jean Bazin, kingship is first and foremost a logical problem: "How can one element within the whole give its name to that whole; how can the private body signify the public body?" His treatment of sovereignty consists in describing the solutions in order to establish from among numerous entities one entity acting as the whole.

We find in this article a precision in terms of writing dictated as much by anthropology and history as by philosophy. This questioning of a division of knowledge relates less to a lack of disciplinary fidelity than to the extension of a social science. Shaped by this desire, Jean Bazin bypasses the problem of an anthropology that takes otherness or ethnicity as its object. His intention is focused on the strategies of differentiation, and on the historical conditions of their emergence. He holds back the impatience of an interpretative science that, rather than understanding nothing about other people, prefers to explain what they believe, thus demonstrating that they are very definitely other. The explanatory wager is suspended in favour of a descriptive type of anthropology.[1]

* This article by Jean Bazin was originally published in the catalogue to the exhibition *À visage découvert* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992, 103–111), which was held at the Fondation Cartier at Jouy-en-Josas from June 18 to October 4, 1992. We are grateful to its curator, Hervé Chandès, as well as to Laurence and Jérôme Bazin, for allowing us to reproduce it here.

1. See: Jean Bazin, "Interpréter ou décrire: Notes critiques sur la connaissance anthropologique," in *Une École pour les sciences sociales*, ed. Jacques Revel and Nathan Wachtel (Paris: Cerf-Éditions de l'EHESS, 1996), 401–420, and "Sciences des moeurs et description de l'action," *Le Genre Humain* 35 (2000): 33–58.

II

What do Major Denham and Captain Clapperton see on March 3, 1823, when they are granted an audience by Ibrahim, the sultan of Bornu? Strictly speaking, almost nothing: "Lodged in a sort of small pavilion closed by lattice railings made of wood . . . , the sovereign could be made out but vaguely." His face, hidden behind a veil, is hard to make out. The sovereign appears without a face.

This contrivance used for audiences was not so much intended to keep his face secret and hidden as to turn it into a "facial-object" and to make visible the mask of kingship. The protocol testifies to the fact that the sovereign is "present as a king: concealment is a royal way of being seen." This method of representation has the effect of producing a collective body (a sovereign body) through the erasure of an individual body. By disappearing, the king stands, as far as everyone is concerned, for kingship.

The invisibility afforded by the royal mask accords in principle with the modes of decoration in which Western kings displayed themselves. Whether visible or invisible, hidden or represented, the king must disappear in order to resemble his representation: "the only variation is the mode of pretence." This system responds to the economy belonging to the image. Through its reflective powers, the image differentiates the body of the sovereign from the sovereign body. The latter qua *image becomes a placeholder for the former.*

Jean Bazin's analysis of "royal silence" ("the hidden king does not speak: he is dumb like an image") is reminiscent of the interpretation proposed by Jacques Rancière concerning the historiographical watershed of the Annales School. In order to be able to claim kingship, the retired body of the sovereign is reconstituted in the writing of history itself. The death of the king becomes the object of an epistemological killing. When Fernand Braudel portrays the death of Philip II, he triggers an encounter between the historian and the king that signifies the end of the history of kings: "To historians he is an enigma: he receives us as he did his ambassadors, with the utmost courtesy, listening to us, replying in a low and often unintelligible voice, never speaking of himself at all."[2] *The king, dismissed by history, is condemned to silence.*

The manner in which kingship is realized within a gathering of individuals by the enforced absence of their representative is described in The King with No Face. *The sovereign exists in terms of the allegiance he shows to his image, thus abandoning himself to the sovereign power of absence.*

Octave Debary

2. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Sian Reynolds (London: Collins, 1973), 1236. Cited by Jacques Rancière in *Les Noms de l'histoire: essai de poétique du savoir* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), 28.

On March 3, 1823, Major Dixon Denham and Captain Hugh Clapperton were granted an audience by Ibrahim, the sultan of Bornu, at the heart of Central Africa, very close to the west bank of Lake Chad. While the guests were kept at a distance, the court solemnly took up position in the open space in front of the palace. Two or three hundred courtiers dismounted from their horses, prostrated themselves before their sovereign, and then sat down with their backs to him ("such is the custom of the country"), forming a huge semi-circle. At the foot of the palace walls, near a door leading to his garden, the sultan, seated on cushions made of silk or satin, was strangely lodged in a sort of small pavilion closed by lattice railings made of wood or cane; it was "through the railing" that he surveyed the assembly gathered before him.[3] These railings were undoubtedly set more closely than the illustration would suggest—the major, or the engraver who reproduced his sketch must have given priority to the clarity of the drawing—, since the account specifies that the sovereign could be made out only very vaguely ("our glimpse was but a faint one"). However, it was all the same possible to surmise that, in addition to a sumptuous turban, the bottom half of his face was covered, with only his eyes and nose remaining visible. The king's face was, thus, doubly concealed through a sort of redundant arrangement: we are hardly able to see that he is almost totally invisible.

Not particularly impressed by the solemnity of the occasion unfolding before them, the two officers mocked the ridiculous appearance of all these pot-bellied people, copiously swathed in from eight to ten bubu tunics, worn one on top of the other, with their chief enveloped in an enormous muslin turban. It is true that all this pomp and grandeur had become all the more pointless because, since the state had nearly crumbled beneath the blows of the Fulani Jihad, the substance of the sultan's power had been lost. Since he was unable to govern, all that remained for him was to amuse himself with "all the folly and bigotry of the ancient negro sovereigns," as the two Englishmen cruelly noted. They undoubtedly included as foolish archaisms, not only the numerous charms made of red leather which adorned all these people (and even their horses), but also the contrivance they disrespectfully compared to a cage, with which the king both revealed and concealed himself.

They did not know, but would certainly have been interested to learn, that this manner of presenting the sovereign was perhaps as ancient as the Sayfawa Dynasty, the last representative of which they were meeting that very day. Five centuries earlier, in his encyclopedic geography compiled for the use of the Arab cultural elite, al-'Umarī had already drawn attention to the strange case of a distant Muslim prince who did not reveal himself to his subjects, not even to his principal chieftains, but received them from behind a

3. Dixon Denham, *Narrative Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa in the Years 1822, 1823, and 1824 . . .* (London: Murray, 1826), 106–108.

"curtain."[4] When, in 1352, Ibn Battuta passed through Takedda, the great copper mine in the middle of the Sahara Desert, the famed traveler heard tell of this "country of Bornu" forty days' journey from there, populated by Muslims and renowned both for the beauty of its imported slave girls and the strange custom to which Idris, its sovereign, adhered. He only spoke to people when he was concealed behind a curtain.[5]

A traveler can only be a merely surprised or ironical observer; he becomes an ethnographer as soon as he aspires to explain what he does not understand. The more absurd it appears to be, the more an exotic oddity requires interpretation: human nature abhors a vacuum of meaning. Without the time required to learn what an observed characteristic signifies in "their" language, it will have to signify something in ours. The ethnology of beginnings—but do can we escape our childhood?—is resolutely positivist. If "others" behave so strangely, they surely have another theory of the world; a wrong one, of course, but in light of which their behavior ultimately proves to be more rational than it seems. Custom is the implementation of belief; it suffices to discover which.

If we suppose that these good people take their king for a god, would it not be more normal, practical even, for them to protect themselves from him with a curtain: how otherwise would it be possible to endure the divine gaze? A mere suspicion of a curtain and, here is the sultan of Bornu endowed with authority (by Meek, the great administrator-cum-ethnographer in British Nigeria, for instance),[6] one in a line of sun kings inspired by the Pharaohs, saluted by subjects who shielded their eyes with one hand in order, quite naturally, to avoid being burnt by their rays.

In any case, whether a "sun king" or not, if the king is hidden, it means that he is divine, or at least that there is an attempt to pass him off as such. It is supposed that, by definition, the divine is in essence too subtle for mortal eyes, although a number of "pagan" religions do not share this abiding principle. By the same token, the king (for example, that of the Jukun peoples of the Benue basin, of whom Meek is the accredited ethnographer) is not supposed to eat, drink, sleep, or die, and likewise no one is able to see him: he is a true spirit. Or at least he has to seem like one.

In fact, the court of Bornu had been Islamized for centuries, so that all the courtiers in turbans would have been the first to be amazed to learn that anyone could suppose that a sort of god was positioned behind them in the "cage." One might still imagine, however, that, cleverly cynical, the Muslim sovereigns were continuing to play the game in response to the outmoded beliefs of the peasants,

4. Al-ʿUmarī, "Masalīk al-abṣār sī mamālik al-amṣār [A history of perceptions concerning the kingdoms of civilized countries]," in *Recueil des sources arabes concernant l'Afrique occidentale du VIII^e^ au XVI^e^ siècle: Bilād al-Sūdan*, ed. Joseph M. Cuoq (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1975), 254, 258.

5. Abu Abdullah ibn Battuta, *Voyages*, vol. 3 (Paris: La Découverte, 1982), 439. This refers to Idris b. Ibrahim who reigned from 1343 to 1366.

6. Charles K. Meek, *A Sudanese Kingdom: An Ethnographical Study of the Jukun-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 123 (first published 1931 by Paul, Trench, Trubner).

blinkered and lacking in faith, whom they held in a state of subjugation. Meek notes with interest that even the governor of Muri (one of the Jukun emirates), whose power was the result of the Jihad movement and the purist revival of Islam carried out by the Fulani emirs, continued to give audiences behind a curtain of pink and white silk, as was noted by a doctor, William Balfour Baikie, in 1854. This is evidence, then, that these Muslim chiefs continued to be "treated as gods by their pagan subjects." Nevertheless, Europeans were also received according to this protocol: were they really believed to be stupid or irreligious enough to be fooled thus?

The invisibility that this strange curtain affords the sovereign, in Bornu and elsewhere, becomes one of the attributes of the appearance, presumed archaic and universal, of the "divine king"—one of the fantastical objects concocted by ethnology in its early stages by collecting all the apparently related peculiarities from all over the world. As with totemism, it is an artifact produced in a laboratory (in Frazer's study at Trinity College among others . . .), gradually transformed over time into one of the cornerstones of knowledge. Thus, it becomes possible to read in a recent *Histoire de la France* that there are two types of monarchy. In the West, the king sits under a canopy, and it is his power which more or less constitutes the divine right, whereas in the distant East, curtains fall from the canopy because his very person is supposed to be divine: "We cannot look at a god."

Perceiving it, not as a sign of lost or native belief, but in terms of what its observable function proves to be, this manner of concealment does not make the king disappear; on the contrary, it represents the manifestation of his presence, highlighting it publicly. The explicit effect is not to pretend that he is not physically present, but palpably to vouch that he is present as a king: concealment is a royal way of being seen. The two officers see practically nothing of the sultan, but they see clearly that he is there and that he is the sovereign. We know nothing more precise concerning the curtain (*hijab*) mentioned by al-'Umarī and Ibn Battuta, but if it was made of cotton or silk, it would have allowed at least a shadow or a silhouette to be seen. In any case, even if we were to suppose that the opacity of the screen is such that we are unable to see anything of the king, the closed curtain points precisely to the fact that the sovereign is there; to the wise, it constitutes a warning of his presence. It is thus only a foreigner, ignorant of court custom, who would wonder where the king is and if he is there at all. This happened to the German geographer, Heinrich Barth, when, on July 8, 1852, he was received by the sultan of Bagirmi to the southeast of Bornu. Without any explanation, he was made to sit in a courtyard between two rows of courtiers opposite a door which opened onto a chamber blocked from view by a blind:

> Being rather puzzled to whom to address myself, as no one was to be seen who was in any way distinguished from the rest of the people, all the courtiers being simply dressed in the most uniform style, in black, or rather blue tobes, and all being bare headed, I asked aloud, before beginning my address, whether the Sultan 'Abd el-Kader was present; and an audible voice answered from behind the screen, that he was present. Being sure that it was the sultan whom I addressed, although I should have liked

better to have seen him face to face, I paid my respects and presented the compliments of Her Britannic Majesty's Government...."[7]

Barth had already had experience of this sort of blind (referred to locally as a *farfar*) at the court of Logon-Birni. It was not an opaque screen, but was made of fine braided straw or reeds; this allowed the prince to observe his interlocutor without being observed himself.[8] It is understandable that the lack of hierarchical reciprocity in terms of eye contact is embarrassing; it is more unsettling than addressing a wall. Yet, the inability to look the king in the eye is certainly surprising for someone accustomed to the etiquette in place in Western courts. Nevertheless, it is a rule of etiquette, which, as such, involves primitive or exotic beliefs no more than, for example, the necessity of addressing the sovereign in the third person.

The screen displayed before his person signals—as does the canopy—who in the assembly is king, declaring his claims to sovereignty in the same way that wearing a crown (imperial, royal, or ducal . . .) represents the simultaneous affirmation of the right to do so. It is enough to read the accounts of the successive European travelers to the region (Denham and Clapperton, then Barth, and, later on, Gustav Nachtigal) to understand that it is a question of politics. It is not a matter of being passed off as a god, but of ensuring one's recognition as a sovereign; whence the preoccupation of every prince, however slight or precarious his power, with the scrupulous observation of the formalities connected with audiences. In all the kingdoms adjacent to Bornu, which had once been subjected to it and in some cases still are (Bagirmi and the small Kotoko principalities of Logon-Birni and Kousseri to the south, Ouaddai to the east, and Darfur further east still, in present day Sudan), concealing the king constitutes an affirmation that he is king in the full sense of the word, and that the political unity which he embodies has claims to independence. It is a language of protocol, which it was particularly important to maintain in terms of the first representatives of a powerful Europe, the threat of which African courts were thenceforth only too aware. It is hardly surprising, given the particularly troubled political history of Sudan in the nineteenth century, that the sultan of Darfur remained resolutely behind his curtain right up until 1916.[9]

Of course, the message did not necessarily always hit home: our two Englishmen were more susceptible to the absurdity of this charade than to the political claims it signified. However, Doctor Nachtigal, who was much more of an ethnographer than an explorer, understood the code and knew how to apply it. When he arrived in Logon-Birni on March 14, 1872, hoping to be granted an audience right away,

7. Heinrich Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa, Being a Journal of an Expedition Undertaken under the Auspices of H.B.M.'s Government in the Years 1849–1855*, vol. 2 (London: Frank Cass, 1969), 535 (first published 1857–1859).
8. Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, 445.
9. Anthony John Arkell, "The History of Darfur, 1200–1700 A.D.," *Sudan Notes and Records* 32 (1951): 234.

he chose to dress in as dignified a manner as possible, in such a way as to impress the second-rate kinglet, in a *burnus* with a veil over his nose and mouth and, what is more, a pair of large blue spectacles. When he was received at last, after having waited two days, the king retaliated by being almost totally invisible. On a platform which formed a veranda, a hut made of rushes had been arranged, its opening closed off in front by a plaited curtain. It was the king within, present, but invisible, to whom Nachtigal had to express his greetings and make his request.[10] The code combines two elements, the screen and the veil over the mouth. It is true that the cloth for the mouth, or *lithām*, is a male sartorial custom among the Saharan peoples, noble Tuareg nomads in particular. However, it has apparently become a political rather than an ethnic sign in the area.

A Tunisian merchant who stayed in the region in the nineteenth century[11] writes that in the court of Darfur, other people wore the *lithām*, but never in the presence of the sultan, except when they went out riding with him. In the palace, only the sovereign concealed his face, adding, as in Bornu, the veil for the mouth to the curtain-cum-screen.

These two elements could either be used in tandem or separately, allowing for a sort of diplomatic game. Thus, Shaykh el-Kanemi, the inspired leader who organized the Bornu resistance against the Fulani, with *de facto* power in 1823, received the two English officers without the plaited screen reserved for his official sovereign, but with the lower part of his face veiled. In the same way, the sultan of Bagirmi, when he received Nachtigal in April, 1872, chose to apply a less rigorous form of protocol than for Barth. The *burnus* and *lithām* did not allow the visitor to see more than "a small part of a black nose," although the curtains used to mask the sovereign were lifted up on the roof of the veranda-platform where he was sitting. It is true, as he was in a precarious situation, having been chased out of his capital by a rival, that he counted on his guest for some form of military aid. And yet, a diplomatic incident was narrowly averted when Nachtigal entered the royal residence and refused to be presented with bare feet, as etiquette required, threatening to dispense with the audience rather than to give in to this indignity, before agreeing, not without considerable discussion, to an acceptable compromise: he retained his stockings.[12] A few months later at the court of Darfur, the curtain was lowered, but Nachtigal obtained the remarkable favor of going behind it and, thus, of greeting the sultan directly. Once it had been reiterated, the margin distinguishing the sovereign could always be provisionally withdrawn as a way of acknowledging the status of the visitor or the power of the nation he represented.

10. Gustav Nachtigal, *Sahara and Sudan*, trans. Allan G. B. Fisher and Humphrey J. Fisher, vol 3. (London: Hurst, 1987), 245, 253.
11. Mohammad ibn Omar el Tounsy, *Voyage au Darfour, ou l'Aiguisement de l'esprit par le voyage au Soudan et parmi les Arabes du centre de l'Afrique* (Paris: Duprat, 1845), 203–204.
12. Nachtigal, *Sahara and Sudan*, 317.

Whatever the variations on the system of concealment—it could be more of less strict according to circumstance—, it was essential that the features of the royal face should never be clearly visible. The curtain or the blind has the maximum effect, but it presupposes a ceremonial situation and a motionless or inactive sovereign. And yet, twentieth century kings participated in military expeditions even if they did not fight in person. Denham and Clapperton heard tell that the sultan Dounama, the predecessor of Ibrahim, overtaken by his pursuers, allowed himself be massacred without defending himself, but not without having taken care to cover his face. The *lithām* shields the king from view only imperfectly—anyone standing fairly close is able to interpret the look, and guess the facial expressions and movements—but it allows the sovereign to continue to appear royal, that is to say, hidden, even outside his palace (and perhaps it has been borrowed from the desert peoples for this purpose). Moreover, when the king is moving about, other precautions contribute to masking his face. A little while after his arrival in the Bagirmi capital, Barth witnessed the return of the prince at the head of his troops noting that: "Even the head of the sultan was scarcely to be seen, not only on account of the horsemen riding in front and around him, but more particularly owing to two umbrellas, the one green and the other of red colour, which a couple of slaves carried on each side of him." In addition, six slaves fanned him continuously with ostrich feathers mounted on long poles.[13]

It sometimes even happened that the sovereign received his guest without concealing himself, but then the low light cast a shadow over his features. Thus, after the official audience granted to Nachtigal, the king of the Bagirmi received him in his private room at twilight so that the presents that had already been announced could be handed over more discreetly:

> Though he was no longer enveloped in a burnus, a *lithām*, and shawls in the former monstrous fashion, yet the hour was so late and the room so darkened on all sides with curtains and hangings that I could see little of his face. It appears to be a duty, or a special privilege, of the kings of Bagirmi and of Logon to be seen by unauthorised persons or desecrated by profane glances as little as possible. For long as I remained in Mbang Mohammedu's entourage and frequent as were my opportunities for conversation with him, I have never seen so much of his features as to make it possible for me to have recognized him again if I had met him in the open.[14]

The curtain-cum-screen placed between the sovereign and his guest could always be seen as a means of protection: the prince does not want to pass for a god, but is simply afraid of the white man. When Yusef, king of Logon, obliged him first of all to address him with the curtain closed, and then amicably invited him into his room, Barth concludes that he undoubtedly saw through the gaps in the blind that "I was something like a human being and evidently of an innoxious kind." When, twenty years later, Nachtigal was waiting impatiently to be received by

13. Barth, *Travels and Discoveries,* 526.
14. Nachtigal, *Sahara and Sudan*, 320.

Ma'aruf, Yusuf's son and successor, a slave at the court who had lived for a long time in Tripoli and who had a "knowledge of the world" explaining that the king was afraid of his sorcerer's arts, we see ethnographic knowledge already in motion with its indispensable intermediary, the informant. However, even when he relinquished the curtain out of concern for diplomacy, the king chose to remain in shadow. This compromise is ample demonstration that, independently of the magico-psychological exegeses of which the king might constitute the object, the ceremonial measures had their own effect, an effect that was clearly observed and described by travelers: the sovereign's face could be shown, but in a manner so as to render a definitive view of his features impossible.

By placing a screen in front of the king's face, a distorted image of it is produced in the eyes of the spectator. Depending on the type of screen used, this face is reduced to a vague form, obscured, fragmented, divided up, striated, and hatched. It was possible for this technique of concealment (the means of which can be decorative: turbans, *lithām*, umbrellas, large fans) to rise to a veritable art in terms of finery, as in the city states of the Yoruba people, far from Bornu to the southwest. There, the face of the sovereign was concealed by a particular type of headdress (*ade*), in the form of a miter, from the front of which fell a curtain of colored beads. Although the features are not clearly discernible, a glimpse of the face is permitted, although it is striped by the shadows cast by the fringe of beads, the features blurred by their constant movement. It is certainly a very awkward sort of finery, and it is understood that the warrior princes of Dahomey chose to delegate this enforced invisibility to the priests of Allada, who were responsible for presiding over the rites of enthronement, there where the dynasty originated. When, in 1826, the very same Clapperton visited the powerful sovereign of Oyo (the *alafin*), the latter already preferred the adoption of a sort of European crown made out of cardboard covered with blue cotton! However, in the 1950s, on the eastern frontier of present day Benin, the king of Ketu was still wearing this headdress.[15] The same is true of the king of Ede in Nigeria, who still wears it to this day, at least for photographs (cf. plate).

Through this process, the face of the individual king, Yusef or Ma'aruf, is replaced by a double, both identical and unrecognizable, which constitutes the public image. This masked face is that of king *qua* king. It signifies not only the king, but kingship to all; it is emblematic of sovereignty. It is, one might say, a facial object that, in the same capacity as the other attributes (throne, scepter, canopy, etc.), represents the sovereign body, as opposed to the body of the sovereign, of the living individual who happens currently to be king. This is why when, a very long time ago, artists such as those of Ife, thought to be more ancient than the Yoruba cities, crafted, undoubtedly as funerary effigies, bronze statues of the king (the *oni*) in majesty, adorned with all the attributes of his function (pectoral, long necklace of beads falling down to the knees . . .), they did not forget to

15. See photograph taken by Montserrat Palu-Marti, published in: Montserrat Palu-Marti, *Le Roi-dieu au Bénin* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1964), plate opposite page 49.

Timi d'Edé, roi yorouba, Nigeria
©Daniel Lainé, 1990

portray his face with vertical striations. It seems to me that this is a conventional manner of depicting the *ade*—the beaded curtain—without which a face would not appear royal.[16] The public image of the royal face, projected by this manner of concealment, prevents, or at least undermines, the identification of the particular individual who happens to be king. The king as king, and as the court regulations command him to appear at a solemn audience, is not supposed to be recognizable. Not that it is a matter of being an incognito king; here the mask does not serve to keep the identity of the wearer a secret. Indeed, everyone knows who is king whether the curtain is drawn or not. Moreover, as Denham and Clapperton note, next to the "cage" partially concealing the sultan, a herald proclaimed his glory and that of his forebears. However, it was ensured that there would be no

16. The iconographical interpretation of these bronzes is the subject of debate. The idea that it is a matter of a "naturalistic" representation of scarification seems to me to be unlikely.

correspondence between the name of king, as generally distinct from the name given to him before his enthronement, and the use of which was thenceforth forbidden, and a particular face. We are surrounded by a multitude of faces to which we are unable to give a name; the king, though, is a name on which we do not have the right to put a face. Paradoxically, the king is therefore a being at once strictly defined—he is unique—and nondescript: for want of being able to allocate a face to him, he is just anybody. As Roland Barthes notes, while observing how the city of Tokyo revolves around the "opaque ring of walls, streams, roofs, and trees" that is the palace, "the visible form of invisibility" or the "emperor who is never seen" is to the letter "no one knows who."[17]

Nachtigal had a very palpable experience of this name with no face when he arrived in the camp serving as the temporary residence of the fugitive king of Bagirmi. He noticed a "shapeless mass, heavily wrapped up" positioned in the courtyard, but surrounded by the attributes of kingship. A guard armed with a rifle was standing behind him, large ostrich feathers emblematic of kingship had been put up around him, and slaves were fanning him with giraffe tails:

> This was Mbang Mohammedu, the celebrated, or notorious Abu Sekkin, of whom, to be sure, on this occasion I did not get to see much. The whole of his figure was hidden in a burnus, the hood of which hung down over his head as far as his eyes, while the rest of his face was veiled by the *lithām*, so that nothing whatsoever could be discovered of either his figure or his features."[18]

The curtain of the sultans of Bornu, as every other similar method, ensures that the king is shown without actually having to introduce anyone. A presentation constitutes a demonstrative definition: I learn to apply a particular name to a particular physiognomy (this snub nose is Socrates). These characteristics of resemblance and dissimilarity distinguish, as far as I am concerned, this other among all these others. Nachtigal was presented to the king, but not the king to Nachtigal: he was shown only "the king" and not the individual serving as the support and the fabric of kingship. It could well be said that, when he left the audience, Nachtigal knew the king of Bagirmi, since he had met him, but as he would have been incapable of identifying his face among a crowd of similar faces, it could equally well be said that he did not know who he was.

Although the custom might seem to us exotic, it shows the logical difficulty inherent in all kingship, namely, how can one element within the whole give its name to that whole; how can the private body signify the public body? It is as Marx observes in the first chapter of *Capital*, just as the value of commodities (their universal exchange value) must necessarily take on the form of one of them—gold for example—in the same way "An individual A, for instance, cannot be 'your majesty' to another individual B, unless majesty in B's eyes assumes the physical shape of A, and, moreover, changes facial features, hair, and many

17. Roland Barthes, *The Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), 32.
18. Nachtigal, *Sahara and Sudan*, 314.

other things, with every new 'father of his people.'"[19] For the incurable tendency of the universal to fall back on the particular, of the one to degenerate into the many, of sovereignty to have a Bourbon nose, wrinkles, or appear unhealthy, there is no other remedy, except the diligent work of representation. The king as such, the sovereign body, can only be embodied. This is a fictitious being, incessantly engendered and re-engendered by rites, protocol, etiquette, prohibitions, heroic accounts, creation myths, etc. In the place of the individual, "the king" must come into play.

Of course, in Western royalty, the face is not only not concealed (if truth be told, those for whom there is a possibility of seeing it are few and far between), but its portrait is widely disseminated, even if it is only on one side of a coin. This image is not always lifelike: a sort of ideal royal face has long been depicted beside the name of the reigning king—another way of obtaining this paradoxical entity which is the name with no face: in the place of the indistinguishable face of the masked king is the indistinguishable face of a king who is perpetually handsome.

Thus, Philippe Auguste, who returned bald from the Crusades at the age of twenty-five, was no less a "*forma venustus*."[20] Individual facial features were taken into consideration at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and, from then on, all the artist's skills were employed to make the individuality of the king subservient to the representation of kingship. Not only was the sovereign frequently painted "in majesty," with all the emblems of sovereignty (mantle sprinkled with *fleurs de lys*, scepter, etc.), but it was also necessary to suggest (by presence, a stately and noble bearing, gravity of expression or angelic smile . . .) how kingship is embodied within the human body itself, to the point that it was made to appear dissimilar to all those who resembled it. Thanks to artistry, the individual with his passions and his faults—this "private" face, cared for and made up by servants, in which only his intimates could detect the feelings—was absent from the painting with "the king" being manifested there. It is as Louis Marin notes, what is a king if not a portrait of a king? How "does one describe the king in a way other than through his image," and is not the image "the whole of the king?"

> [T]he "portrait effect," the effect of representation, *makes the king*, in the sense that everyone believes that the king and the man are one, or that the king's portrait is only the king's image. No one knows that, on the contrary, the king is only his image, and that behind or beyond the portrait there is no king, but a man.[21]

So much so that, when he is effectively present in person rather than as an image, seated on a throne, beneath a canopy, and stared at by his subjects, the king can only endeavor to resemble his portrait in the most exact manner possible: equanimity, immobility, and silence.

19. Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 143.
20. Cf. Jacques le Goff, "Le Moyen Âge," in *L'État et les pouvoirs*, ed. J. Le Goff (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1989), 69.
21. Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha M. Houle (London: MacMillan, 1988), 218.

Concealing the face is an extreme solution but, for this reason, indicative of the logic implicit in every role enacted by the sovereign. Displaying everything by hiding, displaying without revealing, is rudimentary behavior certainly, but in many respects more certain, since it is independent of the capacity of the king to create a kingly appearance, to obtain this "effect of representation" that represents kingship precisely. It is as Herodotus says of the king of the Medes (who might have been hidden by a curtain, as were his Sassanid successors much later); it is enough that he cannot be seen for him to "appear" other, even to his close companions.[22] This is an illusion of mysterious otherness currently sought by certain religious leaders—the "*shaykhs*" of Sudanese Africa or the "prophets" of the Ivory Coast—by dressing up along the lines of erstwhile kings, as if to give to their word an authority that is universal because it cannot be assigned to the recognizable individuality of a face.

By means of a simple process and immediate application, a public image of the sovereign body is substituted for that of the individual king, who is effectively present, but made indiscernible, both unique in terms of name—the name of the sultan is glorified before the court, in the same way as the name of the king is inscribed below a painting or round the circumference of a coin—and identical in appearance to all preceding kings. Each king thus directly represents, rather than through a metaphorical detour, at the same time a class and an example that are unique, along the lines of the paradoxical phoenix. This image of king, at least in Islamic countries, remains merely virtual, without an existence independent of the public gaze, or within the space and time of the ceremonial situation, but analogous in many ways to a sculpted or painted portrait of a king.

As with the royal effigy, the hidden king does not speak: he is dumb like an image, or nearly so. At most, he issues brief instructions to the one who, whether slave or eunuch, is alone empowered to approach him, but in a such a manner, notes Nachtigal, that "we could only hear an indistinct murmur"—"it is not proper for a king of Bagirmi to express his desires aloud in public." The interpreter creates a speech from the inaudible words uttered by the prince, transforming them into a piece of pompous rhetoric. The veil for the mouth, added to the curtain-cum-screen, or not, is in this respect, an important element since it allows the sovereign to speak without being seen to speak. There is no lip movement to correspond with the scarcely audible sound of his voice. The Yoruba kings not only spoke in a low voice, but in addition to the beaded curtain, held a cow's tail in front of the mouth.[23] There are traces of this royal silence in the protocol of the majority of African courts. Even if the sovereign reveals himself with his face uncovered, generally speaking he must not address the public directly, as though the royal word is by nature such that the mediation of a interpreter is indispensable to its understanding.

22. Herodotus, *Histories* 1.99.

23. This object, known as *itukere*, appeared among the royal emblems, like the headdress fringed with beads. Cf. Palu-Marti, *Le Roi-dieu*, 38.

A cover between the individual king and his audience also guarantees the projection of an image of the king that is absolutely inorganic. Not allowing the king to be seen to make any physiological use of his lips seems so essential that, even when the rigor of the etiquette is relaxed, this rule is preserved. Thus, as Alfred Ellis[24] notes, the Ijebu, part of the Yoruba tribe living nearer the coast, have given up the screen that had once concealed the king's face. However, the remaining fabric held in front of him from the neck to the feet, is raised as soon as the king coughs, sneezes, spits, or snorts tobacco. The fact that it is forbidden to see the king eating or drinking, something common in African courts, including those in which the king's face is normally visible, has contributed considerably to the idea that, in these barbarian countries or in olden times, the sovereign intended to pass himself off as a god. It is true that Western kings eat in company rather than in the privacy of their chamber or behind a curtain (and conversely that the effigies of ancient Eastern gods "ate" behind curtains, but perhaps precisely in imitation of kings.)[25] This does not mean, however, that the king was willingly painted in the act of eating. Although the royal meal takes place in public, the process of eating (chewing, swallowing, and digesting . . .) is not a royal act as such. Are we familiar with many paintings in which the king of France or England is represented spitting, sneezing, yawning, or sleeping? If this liberty were taken, the portrait of the king would become a caricature, and sovereignty would evaporate, allowing the man to be seen. Even if the king actually has a healthy appetite, the king *qua* king does not eat, any more than the concept of dog barks.

Concealing the king's face is a process of the same order as a veto on certain statements such as "the king is eating," "the king is sleeping," or "the king is dead." It is not an indication or a result of a belief; it is a rule of political syntax. For all royalty the rules of this syntax are allied, that is to say, where the public body is identified with an individual human body. The fact that the king is made invisible (ceremonial fiction), or that his visible body is believed to have, as its "double," an invisible "mystical body" is logically equivalent—as in the *fictio juris* in the Elizabethan era put forward by Kantorowicz.[26] The only variation is the mode of pretence. But it is necessary through the fictitious game, whatever it is, that the king should not be entirely like his fellow human beings since he serves as a point of reference for the identity of all.

KEYWORDS/*MOTS CLÉS:* history of anthropology/*histoire de l'anthropologie* – ethnographic description/*description ethnographique* – custom/*coutume* – kingship/*royauté* – Bornu/*Bornou.*

24. Alfred B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa; Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Languages* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1894), 170.
25. Cf. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 192–193.
26. Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).