

Fashoda as a Cultural Space A Proposed Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity

**Asia Mahgoub El-Hindi
Sudanese Folklife Research and Documentation Centre
Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports**

Introduction:

The Proclamation of masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity one of the central projects of UNESCO which aims to protect and promote oral and intangible heritage of humanity, defines a cultural space as “a place which brings together a concentration of popular and traditional cultural activities and also as a time for a normally regularly occurring event.”⁽¹⁾

According to this definition Fashoda - the traditional capital of the Shilluk Kingdom - could be identified as a cultural space which needs to be evaluated and enlisted as one of the intangible heritage sites of the world.

Fashoda is considered as the holy land of the Shilluk – one of the Nilotic tribes of southern Sudan. It is the place where most of the rituals and ceremonies of the installation of the Reth (King) takes place. In fact, in order to evaluate Fashoda as a cultural space it is necessary to shed some light on the Shilluk people and their kingdom to see how the Shilluk benefited from their beliefs and cultural values to maintain unity and serve the welfare of the tribe.

The Shilluk and Their Kingdom:

The Shilluk represents one of the major groups which constitute the population of the Upper Nile State namely, the Nuweer, the Dinka, the Shilluk, the Anwak, the Morlly and Bron⁽²⁾. They occupy the area west of the White Nile from Tonga to the south up to Kaka in the north. However, some villages could be found in the eastern bank and also some of them live near the Sobat together with other tribes such as the Dinka and the Nuweer.⁽³⁾

Although cattle represent the symbol of wealth and prestige the Shilluk are almost sedentary and agriculture is the main occupation practiced by most of the Shilluk people.

Considering the social structure of the Shilluk two main social groups could be recognized, the Kwar Reth and Collo. The Kwar Reth is the ruling family, the descendants of Nyikang. The Collo represents the rest of the Shilluk

– the public who could not trace their origin to Nyikang, the divine ancestor of the ruling family⁽⁴⁾

Another two minor groups could be mentioned in this context, the Ororo and the Bang Reth. The first represents one of the ruling family which had been degraded to the Collo rank. The other represents the descendants of the families and clans who used to work as servants for the Reths⁽⁵⁾ However, these two groups are not specifically distinguished from the rest of the Collo particularly in the recent history of the Shilluk.

Nyikang - the Ancestor of the Shilluk and the Founder of their Kingdom:

The most important factor which distinguishes the Shilluk from the rest of the tribes in the southern Sudan is their deep-rooted and well established religions and political system which is recognized as the Shilluk Kingdom. The political organization of the Shilluk Kingdom was built around the central fact that Nyikang - the ancestor of the Reths of the Shilluk - is the mediator between God (Jouk) and Man, and the Reths - the descendants of Nyikang - represent the high priest of the tribal religion⁽⁶⁾ such beliefs are clearly reflected in the rituals and ceremonies of the coronation of the new Reth. The rituals and ceremonies are perfectly enacted to reach their climax when the Reth is said to be possessed by the sole of Nyikang.

According to Shilluk traditions the history of the Shilluk kingdom could be traced back to the sixteenth century A.D.⁽⁷⁾ It was stated that Nyikang the culture –hero and the founder of the Shilluk kingdom - was one of the sons of King Okwa who ruled a country far south beside the great lake. Being unable to succeed the throne of his father, Nyikang became angry and decided to migrate northward. Followed by some of his family he reached a place near Waw in Bahr el Ghazal. He stayed there for some years.⁽⁸⁾

Nyikang then quarreled with his brother Dimo and again he left Bahr el Ghazal and migrated northward. Through the canoe boats, they traveled through the river Nile and settled in Acitatgok - a village near Tonga. Nyikang and his followers moved to Nyilwal where he built his headquarter and then he built his village Dedigo in Fanidwai district. After that many villages had been built by the Shilluk in the western bank⁽⁹⁾

It was believed that the party who moved towards the Sobat Mouth was probably the group from which the Anwak originated. Oral traditions of the Shilluk also referred to Dak - son of Nyikang - who also built his village nearby at Falu.⁽¹⁰⁾

Up to that time Fashoda was not known and Nyikang and many of his successors ruled the Shilluk kingdom from their own villages or residences.

Nyikang himself had chosen Nyilwal as headquarters from which he practiced his responsibility as a Reth. Out of the thirty four Reths who ruled the Shilluk kingdom since the time of Nyikang, nine Reth were stated to rule from their own villages. The rest - about twenty five Reths (25) - reigned from Fashoda.⁽¹¹⁾

The Establishment of Fashoda:

The story of the establishment of Fashoda could not be explained apart from the belief system of the Shilluk which attributes all the phenomena of the Universe to the power of God and his will.

According to Shilluk oral traditions Fashoda was established by Reth Tugo Wad Dakoth (1690 -1710) who ruled the Shilluk Kingdom from his village Badiang , south of Kodok district and not far from the site of Fashoda. The traditions stated that Reth Tugo had two bulls without horns. Those two bulls used to be isolated from the rest of the cattle herd. They used to go towards a certain direction and when they reached there they used to dig the ground with their heads. The phenomenon had been repeated many times and hence it attracted the attention of Reth Tugo and all the chiefs of the tribe. The Reth and his chiefs then held a meeting to discuss the matter. In the meeting the Reth and his chiefs decided that the phenomenon should be considered as a God Will to choose that site as a sacred place. At that time they decided to fill the hole with earth till it became higher than the rest of the ground.

Then the Reth Tugo ordered that four huts should be built in the site. Consequently, the Four Huts called (Athrwic) in Shilluk language were considered as the sacred huts. From that time the site was known to be (Pachot) which in Shilluk language means the two bulls without horns. Later, through time the name was changed to become Fashoda.⁽¹²⁾

It is interesting to note that the duty of rebuilding of the Four Huts had been inherited by the descendants of the clan who first took the responsibility of building them at the reign of Reth Tugo in 1690 A.D.

Fashoda as a Focal Point in the Indigenous Political System of the Shilluk:

The history of the political system of the Shilluk Kingdom revealed the fact that the Shilluk land had been divided into two provinces, Luak and Ger. Luak constituted the southern part of the Shilluk Kingdom and was referred to as Gol Nyikang which indicates that it was settled by Nikang the ancestor of the Shilluk. The northern division (Ger) was called Gol Dhiang "Literally means the Gol of the cow". The term was said to refer to a story which revealed a state of conflict between two Reths. According to the story a bull was slaughtered to

indicate that they had been reconciled⁽¹³⁾ the two old provinces were separated by a Khor called Arepajur, south Fashoda.

Two main chiefs had been appointed by the Reth to keep order in those two provinces, Lauk and Ger. Those two chiefs together with the chief of Muomo in the extreme north and the chief of Tonga in the extreme south could be considered as the four high ranks in the Shilluk Kingdom⁽¹⁴⁾.

The high chiefs were considered as the Reth's representatives in their administrative units. Their role is almost administrative rather than judicial. It is usually restricted to the settlement of local disputes. The rest of the cases are usually dispatched to Fashoda to be settled by the Reth.

The central position of Fashoda with respect to Gol Nyikang and Gol Dhiang the two main divisions of the Shilluk Kingdom - and as the central court in which major cases are usually settled by the Reth let some scholars to describe Fashoda as the focal point of the indigenous system of the Shilluk government⁽¹⁵⁾.

The Importance of Fashoda as a Cultural Space:

Fashoda could be considered and evaluated as a cultural space due to the intensive cultural activities enacted and performed within its domain. Such traditional cultural activities are closely related to the belief system of the Shilluk i.e. the belief in the ancestors and their powers as mediators between God and Man. This fact is clearly reflected in the coronation ceremonies starting from the first step of electing the Reth to the last step of the coronation process when the two silver bracelets are put around his wrists to indicate that he is authorized by his people to take his responsibility as a Reth.

According to their belief system every step in the coronation process has to be done in a certain way, by certain people and in a certain date. Some of the most important cultural activities performed in Fashoda as regards to the coronation of the Reth could be stated in the following point:

- i. As the capital of the Shilluk kingdom it is the place where all the senior chiefs of the Shilluk administrative units meet to attend the election the new Reth.
- ii. According to the customs of the coronation, Fashoda is considered as the most suitable place to where the Reth is taken to spend a quite life before the time of the mourning dance of the previous Reth is held.
- iii. As a place selected according to the Will of the God, almost all of the rituals and ceremonies performed during the coronation of the new Reth are perfectly arranged to reach their climax in Fashoda.

- iv. As a sacred place, Fashoda incorporates many features which stand as symbols of the divine kingdom of the Shilluk tribe. Among the most important features which are found in Fashoda is the sacred building (Athrwic) and the shrine of Niykango. It is also recognized as the place where the traditional documents and traditional artifacts of Shilluk kingdom are kept. Such places are usually visited by many of the Shilluk people.
- v. According to their political and religious system the Reth represents the high rank in the administrative and judicial organization. Hence, Fashoda is considered as the central court to which major disputes are dispatched to be settled by the Reth himself.
- vi. In recent terms Fashoda should be described as the Shilluk parliament where the advisory councils (Loko) of Shilluk are usually held. The clear example of such councils is the one held by the senior Shilluk chiefs after the coronation process of the new Reth is completed.

Notes:

- 1) Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, Guide for the Presentation of Candidature Files, P.6.
- 2) Al-Insān WaTabiaa, Mudiriyat Aali El Nil, Ministry of Culture and Information, Khartoum March, 1974, P.30.
- 3) Ibid, PP 56-57.
- 4) Ibid, P. 58.
- 5) For more detail about these groups see M.E.C. Pumphery, The Shilluk Tribe SNR, Vol. xxiv, 1941, PP. 10-16.
- 6) Ibid, P. 19.
- 7) Al-Insan Wa Al-Tabia, Opcit, P. 55.
- 8) Pumphery (1941) Op-cit P.1.
- 9) Man and Nature (1947) Opcit, P.57.
- 10) Pumphery (1941) Opcit P. 2
- 11) James Alala Deng, Al-Turath al Shaabi Li Gabelat Al-Shilluk, IAAS, University of Khartoum 2005, PP 28-31.
- 12) Al-Insan Wa Al-Tabia, (1974) Opcit, P.75.
- 13) Pumphery (1974) Op-cit, P. 16.
- 14) Ibid, P. 17.
- 15) Ibid., P. 17.