CULTURE SKETCHES

CASE STUDIES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

HOLLY PETERS-GOLDEN

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The University of Michigan

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PREFACE

Anthropology offers a unique perspective. Through its lens we can see, at once, both our kinship with all the rest of humanity as well as our uniqueness. Students peering through this lens for the first time often ask, "How are they the same as we are?" "How are they different?" It is usually with delight that they discover both striking similarities and surprising differences.

This volume is an introduction to nine societies, and each glimpse is brief and necessarily incomplete. It is my hope that any student who is intrigued will look further into the past and present lives of these people. The following chapters are aimed more at sparking interest than appeasing it.

The groups selected are all peoples whose traditional cultures are uniquely their own. Each have distinctive patterns and practices and often provide the prime illustration of important concepts in introductory anthropology courses: Azande witchcraft, Aztec human sacrifice, Tiwi pre-natal betrothal, Yanomamo warfare. Each has faced the challenge of an encroaching world, with differing results.

The complex Aztec empire is no more; Ojibwa culture flourishes. Kaluli music has been the vehicle for an aggressive campaign to prevent rainforest destruction. The isolation of the Tiwi was a salient feature in the development of much of their indigenous culture. Today, they are no longer isolated. They encourage tourism, while making sure younger generations are still taught to gather preferred "bush foods." Ethnographer Napoleon Chagnon, long associated with the Yanomamo, has pledged the rest of his career to their preservation. Nomadic pastoralists like the Basseri face challenges both from aa governments who think sedentary peoples are more "civilized," as well as from environmental analysts who are concerned about the impact of pastoralism and expanding deserts on agricultural lands. Resettlement and development, such as that undertaken among the Azande, cannot succeed if motivated solely by goals of industrial development but uninformed by indigenous culture.

Our world is more than ever a world of change. The exploration and promotion of cultural diversity has been embraced as a mission on some campuses, feared as a strategy of separatism by others, used as a weapon in other venues. As we are increasingly faced with a global culture, anthropology takes on an even greater responsibility to foster respect for differences in the face of change

Acknowledgments

Errors in fact and judgment in the text that follows are mine alone. I extend thanks, however, to those who share in whatever is most successful herein. To Conrad Kottak for his confidence; to Sylvia Shepard for her very able pencil; and to an electronic friend who kept me going daily when postmodernists threatened to take their toll.

Above all, my admiration and gratitude to Marc, Rebecca and Jenna -- fine foragers all-- for their grace under pressure while the home garden was fallow.

Holly Peters-Golden

For Marc, who was part of its first invocation,
and to Rebecca and Jenna, for whom it is a new lesson--
a more important truth than can be found in this, or any book:

You can achieve whatever you love
and will be loved whatever your achievements.

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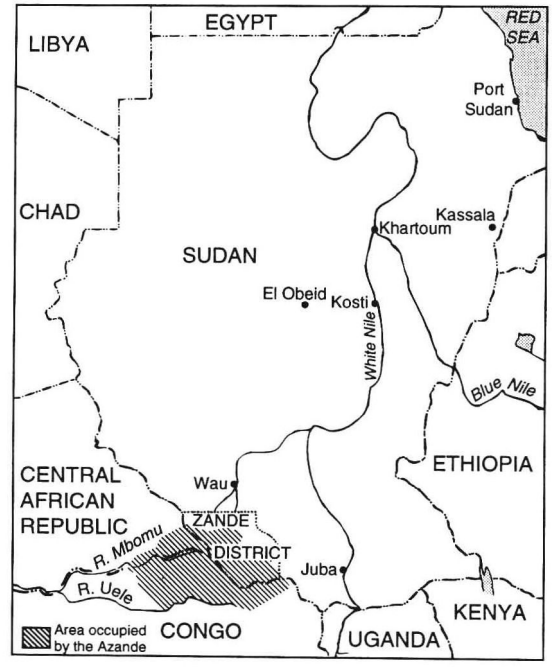

§ THE BEGINNING

There are those who can set broken bones. Only they, and people healed by them, can do this. The first of them long ago fathered a child, and the child had no arms and no legs. He was round, like a cooking pot. People saw him and knew he was a child of Mbori, the supreme being. The ancestor had a dream. In the dream he was told to burn the child, and this he did. He was told to take the child's ashes and mix them with oil; this he could use to heal broken limbs. The ancestor did all he was told to do. He used the ashes of the child born with no limbs, and created the clan of those who can heal the broken limbs of others.

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The Azande people live in a large area in the center of Africa, in the southwestern Sudan, north of Zaire and to the east of the Central African Republic. This is an area of rolling hills with abundant rivers and streams. On the banks of the waters grow tall trees, which provided shade in which to buildhomesteads. However, Azande fell victim to sleeping sickness spread by the tse-tse fly, which breeds in thick bush. Sudanese authorities, concerned about this exposure, forced them to relocate to concentrated settlements near roads. (The closeness of the houses in these new settlements was especially problematic. Formerly, structures along the river banks could be spread far apart; this was preferable to the Azande, who feared neighbors' potential witchcraft, which was only effective at close range.)

The peoples known collectively as the Azande are a melding together of what were separate clans in the past. In earliest times, the clans who lived along the banks of the waters were autonomous local groups. Clan disputes were settled within the families which comprised them. Disputes between clans were settled by elders from each. Azande history tells of a single individual who, through his wisdom and kindness, gained power within his own clan, the Avongara. Soon, under his able

leadership, they became the dominant group. Moving eastward along the riverbanks, they conquered more than fifty other clans, and eventually amalgamated into one Azande group. The history of the area is characterized by such invasions and warfare. (Reining 1966)

In the late nineteenth century, French and Belgian expeditions had set up military outposts in the Sudan; by the early twentieth century the Azande district was under British rule.

SETTLEMENTS

The individual homestead of each couple and their children is the focus of the economic system. The construction and maintenance of homes is a constant occupation, especially owing to the toll taken on them by weather, insects, animals, and fast growing vegetation.

Homes are built of mud and grass and framed on wooden poles and thatched with grass. (One addition to traditional Azande homes is the European introduction of doors fitted with hinges and locks.) In addition to this living space, each household unit had a granary for storing millet. Houses were built around courtyards, which provided ideal places for gathering and conversation. These enclosed courtyards were seen as a window into the household life. Their upkeep was critical since they were seen as evidence of the responsibility or industriousness of their owners. Reining reports that his Azande informants would comment on the state of disrepair of their neighbors' homestead, and "analyzed courtyards as reflections of the inhabitants." They did not exempt themselves from such scrutiny; he continues: "I received a number of apologies from the heads of households about the state of their courtyards, with full explanations for the deficiencies of which they were ashamed." (1966:69)

The traditional courtyard arrangement appeared to have changed very little with European contact, each courtyard reflecting the composition of the household to which it is attached. (Reining 1966) Since each woman must have her own house and granary, polygynous households will have numerous homes and granaries around its courtyard. In a monogamous household, the average courtyard space is about 65 feet in its largest dimension. Households with more adult women may have yards of one hundred feet square. Courtyards belonging to the households of chiefs are double this size.

"Kitchen gardens" were planted adjacent to the courtyards. These were used for plants that didn't require large-scale harvesting or great attention. Pineapple, mango, papaya, and miscellaneous perennial plants used for meals immediate upon picking were found in these plots.

SUBSISTENCE AND MANUFACTURE

The Azande practice shifting cultivation (that is, no crop rotation, and incorporating a fallowing period), relying mostly on maize, millet, gourds, pumpkins, manioc, bananas, groundnuts, and beans. There is also a tradition of using forested area to gather plants which they do not cultivate. The tse-tse fly, problematic to animals as well as humans, makes cattle herding impossible. Whatever meat is consumed is secured through hunting. Dogs and chickens are the only domesticated animals.

The region has ample rainfall and many springs. These were a focus of Zande life, since they have usable water nearly year-round. Water for daily use was carried from stream to homestead and the washing, among other activities, was done at the river banks. In fact, the stream was central to Azande life in conceptual as well as practical terms. For example, distance is expressed by the number of streams between the points in question and the length of a journey is the number of streams crossed during travel. When asked

about an exact location (such as an individual's birthplace) the answer will be the stream nearest that location. Given the centrality of streams to the Azande, their relocation by the European administration caused major disruption in their cultural beliefs and practices.

The year consists of two seasons, one rainy and one dry. During the rainy summer, Azande cultivate their land. Although they have a long growing season and no frosts, the soil is not rich and insects are troublesome. As the hot, dry weather begins, crops mature and are harvested.

Hunting was most feasible in the dry season, when tall grasses had died or were burned, and when the harvest was over. During the rains, vegetation was too dense to allow necessary visibility.

Since rivers were low during this dry season, fish were more accessible. Men employed baskets traps which they set in the rapids of rivers; women dammed the streams into small shallow pools, drained them by bailing, and collected the fish, snakes, and crustaceans that remained. Termites were a favorite food, and their high fat and protein content made them a nutritious part of the diet.

In pre-European days, each family was an independent unit of production. Iron tools and spears were used as bridewealth items, but in general there was no tradition of exchange between households, which consisted of a wife or wives, husband, their children, and other dependents (such as widowed elderly). There was a sexual division of labor, and both women's and men's work were necessary to maintain an efficiently functioning household. Construction and repair of the house and granary were the responsibility of men. The arduous task of maintaining the courtyard and its gardens fell solely to women. Wealth, possessed mainly by chiefs, was primarily in the form of foodstuffs; the tradition of destroying a person's worldly goods upon death left little chance of inheritance of property.

Azande have no tradition of occupational specialization. All manufacturing and craftswork were considered largely avocations, done by most. Woodworking and pottery, making nets and baskets, and crafting clothing out of bark were the most important of these skills.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Kinship

Among the Azande, clan affiliation were not stressed at the local level. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, the ethnographer most responsible for knowledge about the Azande, found, as he endeavored to gather genealogies, that "except in the royal clan, genealogical relationships between clansmen were very seldom known and usually quite untraceable." (1971:14) Local groups, according to Evans-Pritchard, are more political units than anything else. He reports that his discovering members of the same clan living near one another is due as much to chance as anything else.

Chiefdoms

In pre-European times, the Azande were organized into a number of chiefdoms (sometimes called kingdoms), each of which was independent from another. The Avongara were nobility; it was to Avongara lineages that chiefs belonged. Despite the fact that chiefs of differing groups all belonged to the same clan, there was ongoing hostility and warfare between them.

Chiefs ruled their lands and peoples by appointing emissaries (usually sons, but always Avongara) who were sent out to manage various sections of their territories. Within these communities, commoners were deputized to aid in administration.

Chiefs functioned as military leaders, economic leaders, and political leaders. Unmarried men were recruited into groups that functioned both as warriors and laborers on the king's lands. The governors of the territories had gardens which were also worked by these troops. Both governors and chiefs collected food from the people in their domain (provincial governors sending on to the chief a portion of their tribute as well) to be redistributed. In addition to food, spears and other items (often payment for fines or bridewealth) were redistributed by the chiefs.

Warfare

Several miles of unsettled forest and bush were maintained between chiefdoms. Watch was kept on these borders by trusted sentinels who were designated to build there houses along these boundaries.

During the rainy season when grass grew tall and provided good cover, surprise attacks were made on these border sentries, usually ordered by the provincial leader. He undertook this action on his own, without permission granted from the chief. Counsel, however, was sought from a poison oracle, a process wherein poison is administered to an animal while questions are posed to the inhabiting spirit. The poisoned animal's behavior, as well as point at which it succumbed to the poison, were interpreted by those with such skills. Information was obtained concerning the most propitious days and place for the raid, the expected level of casualties, and which companies of warriors should be entrusted with the most dangerous duties. If the oracle indicated that the time was not right for victory, the plans were abandoned.

The oracle also designated a suitable time and place for the attack, and the proper individual to act as a spy. This individual was sent to report on as many aspects of the homestead to be raided as he could determine. Often the spy went under the pretense of visiting a relative or wishing to trade. The best time for a raid was on a feast day when men would be involved in the festivities, not likely to be armed, and quite likely to be drunk. To determine the exact day of the feast, the spy would plan his visit during the preparations for the festivities. Since beer was always brewed for the celebration, the spy could determine the feast day based on the stage of the brewing process.

A successful raid yielded tools, arms, food, and chickens, some of which was sent to the chief for redistribution. Whatever could not be carried off was destroyed. Huts and granaries were burned.

In addition to raids, there were mobilizations of war campaigns on a grand scale. These were ordered by the chief, after having consulted his own poison oracle, and might continue over a period of weeks. While knives and spears were used exclusively in raids, the introduction of rifles into these larger confrontations resulted in a shift from hand-to-hand combat to shots being fired from a distance. Only when ammunition was exhausted would those warriors yielding spears converge on the enemy.

Marriage

The traditional Azande system of marriage was greatly disrupted by European involvement. Administrators legislated broad changes, especially regarding bride payment, divorce, and age at marriage. Although many of these were ostensibly designed to improve the status of women, ethnographer Reining regards them rather as "an experiment in altering some aspects of a culture without providing for changes in values...[illustrating] the unpredictability of arbitrary cultural changes." (1966:61-2) Azande did not share the European view that marriage was especially disadvantageous to women, whom they never regarded as servile, despite administrative interpretation of their customs.

Traditionally, the instigation for marriage among the Azande comes from the potential groom. When a man wanted to marry a woman, he asked an intermediary to approach her father with his offer. Unless the suitor was deemed undesirable immediately, her father would discuss the matter first with his brothers and sisters, and next with the woman in question. If she was agreeable, the money sent with the intermediary was accepted.

Several days later, the suitor would visit his promised bride's parents, bringing gifts and demonstrating his respect. In turn, their daughter visited her suitor's home for a "trial period" of several weeks, after which she returned to her parents home to make her final decision regarding the marriage.

During the time spent in reflection by the woman, the groom-to-be consulted oracles to determine whether the marriage, should it occur, would be a happy one. If both oracle and woman regarded the match favorably, the bride's family traveled to the home of the groom, where the ceremony took place. The marriage was sealed with the installation of the new bride's own cooking hearth.

Reining describes traditional Zande marriage as a process which continues indefinitely over time, with a protracted payment of brideprice. (1966) A small part of the price was paid at the time of the marriage ceremony, but in reality a husband was always indebted to his wife's family. It was always his responsibility to help in his in-laws fields, and he had mortuary obligations in the event of a death in his wife's family.

The material payment of the agreed-upon brideprice was not, in fact, as important as the attitude and behavior of a husband to his wife and her parents. (Reining 1966) If he was a gentle, loving husband and labored adequately for her parents, remuneration could be forestalled for years. This was often, in reality, the situation preferred by in-laws: it afforded them considerable influence over their daughter's husband. If the husband was not performing his duties adequately, the wife's parents might insist their daughter move back to their home, forcing the husband to negotiate with her parents for her return. Thus, the relationship of primary emphasis in marriage was that of a son-in-law and his wife's parents. In polygynous situations, men who had a good relationship with their in-laws often expressed the desire to marry his wife's sister because of the advantages of a good relationship with in-laws.

The topic of homosexuality in Azande culture has been regularly addressed, especially in the context of the unmarried warriors, who, during the several years spent living apart from women, had homosexual relations with the boys who were apprentice warriors. These practices, however, were not necessarily maintained as a lifelong pattern of sexual orientation. Generally after their experiences with so-called "boy-wives," the warriors entered into heterosexual marriages.

Less attention has been paid to Azande lesbianism, relationships that were often formed between co-wives. Although there is not a wealth of information concerning these practices, according to Evans-Pritchard, "All Azande I have known well enough to discuss this matter have asserted...that female homosexuality...was practiced in polygamous homes." (1970:1429)

Azande husbands felt threatened by such activities, yet could not stop them; thus, women usually kept the sexual nature of their friendships secret. (Blackwood in Suggs and Miracle 1993) Two Azande women who wished to formalize their relationship could do so in a ritual that created a permanent bond. (Evans-Pritchard 1970) In addition to assuring both the emotional and economic support of the partner, it has been suggested that this formalization (a ritual akin to Azande "blood brotherhood") may have both widened a woman's trade network and enhanced her position in the community. Blackwood interprets these relationships as indicating that Azande men's control over women did not

extend into the realm of activities between women. (Suggs and Miracle 1993)

RELIGION, BELIEFS, AND EXPRESSIVE CULTURE

Missionaries settled in the Sudan beginning in the early part of the twentieth century, and attempted to draw on indigenous beliefs as a way to promote Christianity.

Mbori is defined by Evans-Pritchard as "a ghostly being to whom the creation of the world is attributed." (1937:11) Missionaries and government officials writing about the Azande attempted to create out of Mbori a deity which would fit their own tradition. Evans-Pritchard, however, warns against looking for religion, as organized elsewhere, in Azande culture. Mbori is not convincingly portrayed by the Azande as a god analagous to the Supreme Being as found elsewhere. They have no shrines to Mbori, and no materials used in worship. There is only one ceremony in which his name is invoked, and that is performed infrequently at best. When he attempted to pursue the topic of theology, and Mbori in particular, Evans-Pritchard found the Azande "bored by the subject ...and unable to express more than the vaguest ideas about him."

The trickster tales

One universal motif in folk literature appears to be that of the "trickster," and these tales are told among the Azande as well. To a large extent the tales serve to assert and affirm social rules. They provide examples of the consequences one can expect if moral dictates are not observed. They are always told for the benefit of children, to supplement didactic social training. They are designed to appeal to a young audience (although they often contain very adult themes, and are very much enjoyed by adults) by featuring a main character who possesses a child's curiosity and temptation to break the rules. Demonstrated in the behavior of the trickster are a child's propensity for imitation, the ramifications of overlooking part of a ritual, the dangers inherent in exhibiting behaviors or assuming roles in society which are inappropriate.

While there are many groups of trickster tales told among the Azande, the best known concern the adventures of a character named Ture. The stories focus on Ture's elaborate machinations as he attempts to secure what he is after, and ends in describing his great success or dismal failure. His wants are generally basic; he is often in pursuit of food, such as meat, termites, porridge, mushrooms, honey: the items most desirable in a Zande diet.

Ture's rashness often leads him to situations in which he must find a way to prevent his own death, often while in the form of a bird or animal. In many tales he is intrigued by either fire or water, sometime regarded as necessities, sometimes as playthings. Despite his need for everyday goods, he often pursues items of pure luxury: "salt to improve the taste of his food, a barkcloth which hums harmoniously as the wearer moves, and a means of opening termite mounds to provide him with a home instead of building huts." (Street 1972:83)

Ture often shows poor judgment and questionable values, striving for something only because it is novel, or belongs to someone else, rather than because it is of any use to him. Thus, when he learns that someone possesses the ability to remove his own intestines and clean them, he wants only to be able to learn to do the same. When he obtains a secret formula for putting out fires, he sets his own house ablaze just so he can extinguish it. As the latter example suggests, oftentimes Ture will create ends just for the ability to use the means. (Street 1972)

Once Ture has chosen a goal, he begins to set his strategy for its achievement. However, his strategies tend to ignore all social

convention. He usually uses trickery or deception to get what he wants. However, his attempts to use others to satisfy his own needs usually end in failure.

Often Ture tries to use magical spells or rituals that are not his to use. Because he is not the rightful owner of the magic or ceremony, he is unable to obtain the results he seeks. (One is reminded of the troubles encountered by the "Sorcerer's Apprentice," who borrows his master's hat and attempts to perform his chores with magical assistance, only to be overwhelmed by the power he has unwittingly unleashed.)

For example, Ture overhears a discussion about how two sons found success in hunting after cutting off their dying father's toe. In his eagerness to try this formula for hunting success, Ture murders his father, buries the toe he has severed, and goes out to hunt. To his surprise, he catches very few animals, and most of his companions are killed during the effort. The formula, it turns out, is only effective when the toe is offered willingly.

In other instances, the formula backfires because it is in the wrong hands: Ture has obtained it under false pretenses, and he was not meant to have it. While Ture may overhear a strategy for success, or may be given the tool to implement a strategy, he often has to resort to trickery to get the desired secret or magic.

While tales end with a particular lesson--Don't attempt another's behavior without their skill, or, If you are greedy, your acquisitions will be too much to handle--the Zande tales are more than merely moral examples. They employ themes common to many peoples. Evans-Pritchard suggests the tales "represent deeper psychological forces present in us all, those elements which we would like to give rein to but cannot because of the rules of society."(Street 1972:86)

The tales also endeavor to teach flexibility, since rules are not always functional in every situation. To instill the message that sometimes rules must be broken, Ture the trickster elaborates the middle ground between order and chaos, and moderation in the application of convention. Classically, trickster tales describe a society's boundaries and rules and assert its unique identity. If viewed from this perspective, the Zande tales help us understand their society as well as some broader tenets of human nature.

Witchcraft

The Azande are perhaps better known for their pervasive belief in witchcraft than for any other aspect of their culture. However, in his classic description of witchcraft among the Azande, Evans-Pritchard asks the reader to be aware "that the Zande cannot analyze his doctrines as I have done for him...It is no use saying to a Zande 'Now tell me what you Azande think about witchcraft' because the subject is too general and indeterminate...to be described concisely. But it is possible to extract the principles of their thought from dozens of situations in which witchcraft is called upon to explain happenings...Their philosophy is explicit, but it is not formally stated as a doctrine." (1937:70) (In such situations, an anthropologist endeavors to construct such a "doctrine" through fieldwork. The resulting product may look quite dissimilar from the indigenous view. [Barrett 1991])

Witchcraft is thought to be an actual physical property residing inside some individuals, who may themselves be unaware of their power. It is inherited, passed from father to son and mother to daughter. Azande believe that if the soul of the father is more powerful, the child conceived will be a boy; if the mother's soul substance is greater, their child will be a girl. Thus, although every child is a product of both parents, each also has more of one particular parent's soul. And if that parent is a witch, inheriting this inherent power to do harm is inevitable. Since this property is organic, it grows as a person

grows. Therefore an older witch is a more dangerous witch. Children, whose witchcraft substance is so small, are never accused of major acts of harm (such as murder). They can, however, cause minor misfortunes for other children.

Unlike sorcery, which employs charms and spells, witchcraft is deployed by sheer willpower. Witches send the spirit of their own witchcraft entity to eat the flesh and organs of their intended victims. Thus a witch may be at home asleep at the time illness or injury occurs. It is the "soul of the witchcraft" that travels through the night. This substance cannot travel great distances, however, and it is for this reason that Azande feel more secure if they are able to live at a distance from their neighbors. The "short range" nature of witchcraft allows the perpetrator to be more accurately identified; all those beyond the limits of a witch's capabilities, even with evil intent, may be eliminated. If a person is taken ill while traveling, it is in the location that illness struck that the witch must be found.

The Azande believe that witchcraft is at the base of all misfortune, great or small. If a potter opens his kiln only to discover his pottery cracked, he intimates witchcraft; if a child stubs her toe at play, she suspects witchcraft; if a hunter is gored by an elephant, he lays blame for the injury squarely on a witch.

Azande entertain no concept of "accidental" death. People die only as victims of murder, whether committed by witches or by the magic of revenge reserved for retaliation against suspected witches.

Despite these convictions, Azande do not live in constant terror of witches. (Nanda 1991) In fact, Mary Douglas reminds us that Evans-Pritchard's assessment of the Azande was that they were the happiest and most carefree peoples of the Sudan. "The feelings of an Azande man, on finding that he has been bewitched, are not terror, but hearty indignation as one of us might feel on finding himself the victim of embezzlement." (Douglas 1980:1)

Since a witch's motivation is not random, but rather envy or hatred directed at a specific person, a victim searches for a suspect among those with whom he has argued, or who may have cause to be jealous of him. How then can he identify his aggressor? For this, and other purposes, Azande consult a variety of oracles.

Oracles

The Azande consult oracles regarding a wide range of things about which they need information. They ask for guidance in planning a marriage, taking a journey, building a house, organizing a raid. In addition to whatever their current misfortune may be, they inquire about whether their health will be endangered in the future.

In pre-European times, Zande chiefs consulted oracles to confirm their military decisions, but chiefs were also charged with judicial duties. Every accusation was brought before the chief to adjudicate. To this end, he employed several people whose responsibility was to assist in the consultation of oracles. It has been said that the Azande belief in witchcraft is the supporting framework of their entire judicial system. (Mair 1974:221)

An oracle is a device for revelation. Among the Azande there are many from which to choose, with varying reputations for reliability. By far the most powerful is benge, the poison oracle, used by men alone. Its decisions are relied upon without question, and no undertaking of great import is attempted without its authorization. In attempting to convey its centrality, an Azande informant of Evans-Pritchard drew the analogy between the books of Europeans and the poison oracle of his own people. All the knowledge, guidance, memory, and truth that are derived from trusted Western writings reside for the Azande within the poison oracle. Evans-Pritchard

came to view it as less a ritual than a necessity:

"For how can a Zande do without his poison oracle? His life would be of little worth. Witches would make his wife and children sick and would destroy his crops and render his hunting useless. Every endeavour would be frustrated, every labour and pain would be to no purpose. At any moment a witch might kill him and he could do nothing to protect himself and his family. Men would violate his wife and steal his goods, and how would he be able to identify and avenge himself on adulterer and thief? Without the aid of his poison oracle he knows that he is helpless and at the mercy of every evil person. It is his guide and counsellor." (1937:262-3)

Despite this seeming indispensability, later ethnographers have pointed out that benge poison, expensive and difficult to obtain, was most likely an oracle available regularly only to men of wealth. This limitation may have acted both to engender social obligations and to grant power and prestige. Men who cannot afford the costly poison, or who do not possess the proper chicken to which the poison must be administered, ask a wealthier kinsman, or deputy of the chief, to consult the oracle on his behalf. It is their duty to oblige. It is older men who are likely to have the means to seek counsel from the oracle. This access to information gives them power over younger men. Not only can they ask the oracles about the intentions and behaviors of their juniors, they are also always supported in their decisions by the considerable weight of oracular authority, to which younger or poorer men have no direct access, and so cannot challenge. (Evans-Pritchard 1937)

The benge poison ordeal is an elaborate procedure, requiring great skill and finesse in both the administration of the poison and the posing of the questions. Poison is administered, by an expert in the task, to a small chicken. The expert must know how much poison is necessary, how much time should elapse between doses, whether it should be shaken to distribute the poison, how long and firmly the chicken should be held, and in what position. Each barely perceptible movement made by the bird is significant to the trained eye.

Once the poison has been administered the order in which questions are asked, whether they are phrased in a positive or negative frame, must all be determined by the questioner. The oracle is addressed as if it were a person. Every detail of the situation in question is explained, and each individual question may be embedded in five or ten minutes of speech. The benge poison shows its answer by responding through the chicken to the question, "If this is true, benge kill the fowl'" or "If this is not the truth, benge spare the fowl." Each answer is then tested by repeating the interpretation of its reply, prefaced with the question "Did the oracle speak the truth in saying...." (Mair 1974)

An oracle more readily available to all is the termite oracle. This is used as often by women as men, and even children may participate. Two branches are cut, each from a different tree. They are inserted together into a termite mound, and left overnight. The answer is indicated by which branch has been eaten. Though certainly less elaborate and costly than the benge oracle, consulting termites is a time-consuming affair, since only one question may be posed at a time, and one must wait all night long for the answer.

Least reliable but most convenient is the rubbing-board oracle, a device resembling a Ouija board, made of two small pieces of wood, easily carried to be consulted anywhere, at any time. One small piece of wood is carved with a handle, and is rubbed across the top of a second piece, fashioned with legs to stand on. Questions are asked as the wood is moved; as it sticks or catches, so the answer is revealed.

Accusing a witch

There are two distinct sorts of accusations of witchcraft: one in which illness or misfortune has occurred, the other after someone has died. These differ in both the function of accusing an individual, and the ramifications of being found guilty.

The aim of accusing a person of witchcraft in the former situation is to bring about some resolution to the conflict which induced the attack, and return the relationship to equilibrium. Speaking ill of a person, or even wishing someone injury, is ineffectual without a social tie: the curse of a stranger cannot do harm. Thus, a relationship with the accused is a prerequisite for bewitchment. (An individual must be suspected, or else his or her name could not have been presented to the oracle for confirmation or denial of guilt.)

When the chicken dies during the benge poison ordeal, a wing is cut off, placed on a stick, and brought to the local deputy of the chief, telling him the name of the individual confirmed by the benge. A messenger, sent with the wing to the alleged witch, places it on the ground, and announces that benge has been consulted regarding the illness of the accuser. Usually this charge is met with denial of any ill intent. At the very least the accused pleads ignorance of harm derived from his or her own mangu, or witchcraft substance. As a demonstration of good faith, the alleged witch takes a mouthful of water, and sprays it over the wing. So doing, she or he beseeches the mangu to become inactive, allowing the victim to recover. The messenger reports these events to the chief's deputy.

In the event of a "murder," the aim is not pacification but revenge. Restoring amicable relations is clearly not possible; a post-morten accusation is an indictment leading to heavy compensation, sometimes paid with the witch's own life. Exacting such a toll permanently alters the relationship between the kin group of the victim and that of the accused. (McLeod 1972)

Witchcraft in its social setting

The Azande chiefdom is formally structured in a clear cut hierarchy, from the chiefs at the top through their deputies, armies, local governors, and ending with individual householders. Built into this structure is the elimination of most opportunities for unequal competition: that is, chiefly lineages did not compete with those lesser, nor did the rich with the poor, or parents with their children. As Douglas has observed, accusations of witchcraft arose only in those social situations which fell outside of the political structure. (1980) Thus, co-wives might accuse each other, as might rivals in other arenas. Since witches could be unintentionally dangerous, their mangu could be set into motion by understandable resentments and jealousies. The accusation and eventual demonstration of remorse set these ill-feelings to rights. Events that can be explained by an individual's lack of technical skill (such as the shoddy work of an inexperienced carpenter) by personally motivated actions are not likely to be involved in the realm of witchcraft. As Parsons observes, one can imagine many motivations for a person to claim that witchcraft was at the root of their adultery, but this would result in ridicule, "because everybody knows witches don't do that." (1969:195)

Witchcraft beliefs can function effectively as a way of managing the anxiety resulting from random misfortune. This is evidenced by the prominence given to illness and death as occasions for witchcraft accusations.

Witchcraft as social control and leveling mechanism

Witchcraft may serve as an effective agent of social control. The lengthy process involved in making an accusation acts to forestall hasty and emotional confrontations. Charges must

have group support behind them and are not leveled carelessly.

An individual's behavior can be guided by the knowledge that wrongdoing might likely result in retaliatory witchcraft. Additionally, cognizance that jealous or hostile behavior might place one in a position of being suspect should misfortune occur might lead one to be quite circumspect. Wishing to be neither suspect nor victim, Azande possess, in witchcraft, both an effective sanction against socially disruptive behavior and a vehicle for handling hostility.

Because an individual with great wealth is likely to engender the jealousy of others and the attendant bewitchment, Azande are not likely to attempt to outproduce. It is in this way that witchcraft acts as a levelling mechanism, indirectly keeping wealth balanced

The "logic" of Azande witchcraft

The attribution of the cause of all misfortune to witchcraft may seem extreme. In fact, Evans-Pritchard himself engaged in lively debate with informants who described as witchcraft events that seemed to him the result of entirely "natural" phenomena. He eventually recognized that they did, in fact, have a very clear understanding about the contribution of the natural world to their misfortune. When Evans-Pritchard suggested to a boy, whose foot had been injured when he tripped over a tree stump, that a witch could not possibly have placed the tree stump in his way, the boy agreed. He recognized that nature had contributed the tree stump, and, further, that the tree stump had cut his foot. His evidence of witchcraft was simply that despite his vigilance in watching out for tree stumps, as well as his safe passage on that same path hundreds of other times, this time he had been injured. This time, there was witchcraft.

Along these same lines, when a granary collapsed, injuring several people who had been sitting in its shade, Azande saw no contradiction in their dual assertions that termites had eaten at the legs of the building, resulting in its collapse and that witchcraft was responsible. They further admitted that no witch had "sent" the people underneath the granary in order to trap them: it was afternoon, and they were merely seeking shade. While we would call this series of events coincidence, or perhaps "being in the wrong place at the wrong time," Azande are able to form an explanatory link between these events. That link is provided by witchcraft.

During his stay in the Sudan, Evans-Pritchard witnessed the suicide of a man who was angry with his brothers. Although his despair over his conflict was well known, and when his body was found hanging from a tree, all readily acknowledged that he had, in fact, hanged himself, the cause of death was witchcraft. At Evans-Pritchard's behest, an Azande friend explained that "only crazy people commit suicide; if everyone who was angry with his brothers committed suicide there would soon be no people left in the world; if this man had not been bewitched he would not have done what he did do." (1937:71)

It is once the supernatural premise--that people have witchcraft substance in them, and can harm others with it--is granted that the Azande argument becomes logical.

These beliefs concerning witchcraft endure today, with some modifications. Resettlement has forced them to accept living in closer quarters, depending upon screens to keep them out of neighbors' view, if not their reach. When asked about fears concerning the proximity of witches, Azande report that they feel able to relocate should misfortune occur. This would remove them from any nearby threat.

EUROPEAN DEVELOPMENT AMONG THE AZANDE