

2011-2012:
AHAN7011: COSMOLOGY, MAGIC AND
DIVINATION : Seminar 2

**Anthropological Perspectives on Divination
and Magic: Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft,
Oracles and Magic among the Azande***



What is Witchcraft?

- 1. **In medieval and early modern Europe the older village practices of cursing and blessing**, healing and manipulating people and objects (*malefice*), became inextricably linked with Christian theology.
- 2. **Church reformers identified witches or sorcerors as adversaries of Christianity** and agents of Satan, projecting onto those identified an inversion of all that was considered holy and civilised.
- 3. **African witchcraft and sorcery**: closer to older European notions of *malefice* and the evil eye than it is to this Christianised 'shadow' version of its own image. In Africa too, European missionaries tried to fit the African worldview (which in many instances included belief in the power of witches, into a Christian (or anti-Christian) framework.
- 4. In recent years, we have seen the growth of Western 'Pagan' forms of witchcraft. These may be consciously experimental, drawing eclectically on many traditions and creating new ones, as with Wicca, or they may claim continuity with a hidden tradition said to have survived years of persecution through secrecy and oral transmission, primarily within families.

Evans-Pritchard among the Azande



- Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973)
- Social anthropologist (Professor of Social anthropology at Oxford: 1946-1970)
- Most of his fieldwork was conducted in colonial Africa, notably among the Nuer and the Azande of southern Sudan (in 1920s and 1930s).

Witchcraft among the Azande



- The Azande (in 1920s and 1930s) numbered about half a million.
- Mainly agriculturists, living in the Southern Sudan and eastern Congo.
- In some societies, witchcraft is hidden or denied but not among the Azande.

Witchcraft and Sorcery

- **Witchcraft:** for the Azande, a psychic power inherited from a parent of the same sex. Witchcraft substance can be detected in the body by autopsy after a person has died. Witchcraft may be used to harm others either consciously or unconsciously by sending out or activating witchcraft substance. The Azande refer to witchcraft as *mangu* and a witch as a *boro (ira) mangu*.
- **Sorcery:** bad or illicit magic involving the conscious use of medicines in order to harm others. Sorcery is a skill that can be learnt, rather than a disposition that is inherited. The Azande terms used to describe sorcery are *gbegbere (gbigbita) ngua* or *kitikiti ngua*. A sorcerer is *ira gbegbere (kitikiti) ngua* (Evans-Pritchard (1976; original date of publication: 1937, pp. 227-228).

Witchcraft in Zande Society

- I had no difficulty in discovering what Azande think about witchcraft, nor in observing what they do to combat it. These ideas and actions are on the surface of their life and are accessible to anyone who lives for a few weeks in their homesteads. Every Zande is an authority on witchcraft. There is no need to consult specialists. There is not even need to question Azande about it, for information flows freely from recurrent situations in their social life, and one only has to watch and listen. *Mangu*, witchcraft, was one of the first words I heard in Zandeland, and I heard it uttered day by day throughout the months (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p.1).



Oracles and Witchcraft

- When witchcraft is suspected a man will consult an oracle to confirm that witchcraft is the cause of the misfortune and to identify the witch or witches.
- **The poor man's termite oracle**: two sticks are inserted into a termite mound while the man asks specific questions such as: 'If X is a witch then eat the stick'.
- **The rubbing board oracle**: a specialist slides one piece of wood over another as similar yes/no questions are posed, the friction of the wood giving the answers.
- **The poison oracle (*benge*)**: the most prestigious form of oracle which can only be used with the authority of the chief. The poison is administered to chickens as the operator puts questions to the oracle. There is a double check on the procedure. If the question was initially phrased, 'If Y is a witch, then let the fowl die' and the chicken were to die, the same question would be repeated a second time but with the injunction to let the chicken live. If witchcraft is confirmed, the accused is presented with the bird's wing as a sign of his or her guilt.

The poison oracle (*benge*)

The poison oracle, *benge*, is by far the most important of the Zande oracles. Zande rely completely on its decisions, which have the force of law when obtained on the orders of a prince. A visitor to Zandeland hears as much of the poison oracle as he hears of witchcraft, for whenever a question arises about the facts of a case or about a man's well-being they at once seek to know the opinion of the poison oracle on that matter. In many situations where we seek to base a verdict upon evidence or try to regulate our conduct by weighing of probabilities the Zande consults, without hesitation, the poison oracles and follows its directions with implicit trust. No important venture is undertaken without authorization of the poison oracle. In important collective undertakings, in all crises of life, in all serious legal disputes, in all matters strongly affecting individual welfare, in short, on all occasions regarded by the Azande as dangerous or socially important, the activity is preceded by consultation of the poison oracle (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, pp. 121-122).

Cause and Effect in Witchcraft

A boy knocked his foot against a small stump of wood in the centre of a bush path, a frequent happening in Africa, and suffered pain and inconvenience in consequence. Owing to its position on his toe it was impossible to keep the cut free from dirt and it began to fester. He declared that witchcraft had made him knock his foot against the stump. I always argued with Azande and criticised their statements, and I did so on this occasion. I told the boy that he had knocked his foot against the stump of wood because he had been careless, and that witchcraft had not placed it in his path, for it had grown there naturally. He agreed that witchcraft had nothing to do with the stump of wood being in his path, but added that he had kept his eyes open for stumps, as indeed every Zande does most carefully, and that if he had not been bewitched he would have seen the stump. As a conclusive argument for his view, he remarked that all cuts do not take days to heal but, on the contrary, close quickly, for that is the nature of cuts. Why, then, had his sore festered and remained open if there were no witchcraft behind it? This, as I discovered before long, was to be regarded as the Zande explanation of sickness. (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, pp.19-20).

Cause and Effect

- Evans-Pritchard points out that the Azande are not ignorant of cause and effect. They are simply ‘foreshortening the chain of events and in a particular social situation are selecting the cause that is socially relevant and neglecting the rest’ (Evans-Pritchard 1976, p.25).
- If a man is killed by a spear in a skirmish with enemies the physiological cause of death is not socially relevant (as there is nothing that can be done to bring the man back to life). What can be done is to identify the witch who guided that particular spear to that particular man and to punish him or her.
- “Hence if a man is killed by an elephant Azande say that the elephant is the first spear and that witchcraft is the second spear and that together they killed the man” (1976, p.26).

Cause and Effect (2)

- Evans-Pritchard: explanations of witchcraft provide the 'missing link' in a chain of causation.
- There may be straightforward 'natural' explanations for events, but these do not account for the element of synchronicity or chance that lead natural events and people to collide in time and space.
- Azande thought is presented as logical and rational (if mistaken according to Western scientific precepts): for Evans-Pritchard's time this is quite revolutionary!
- It is not that the Azande have no knowledge of natural causation. Their philosophy fills the gaps in such a theory so that the whole of life and death are imbued with meaning.

Anthropology and the mentalities debate

- Evans-Pritchard described **participant observation** (what anthropologists do during their fieldwork) as both entering into and withdrawing from another culture.
- The anthropologist 'lives in two different worlds of thought at the same time, in categories and concepts and values which often cannot easily be reconciled' (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p.243).
- When asked whether he accepted Azande ideas of witchcraft, he gave the 'yes and no' answer familiar to many field anthropologists:
- In my own culture, in the climate of thought I was born into and brought up in and have been conditioned by, I rejected, and reject, Zande notions of witchcraft. In their culture, in the set of ideas I then lived in, I accepted them; in a kind of way I believed them...If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p.244).
- The type of society in which one is raised affects one's worldview. Are there fundamentally different ways of thinking in different societies?

The Mentalities Debate

- Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1857-1939): argued that there are two different types of ‘mentality’, one primitive (prelogical, mystical) and the other modern (rational, logical).
- In 1938, Levy-Bruhl rejected his earlier thesis and stated that these different ways of thinking are present in every human.

Magic, Rationality and Western Science

- Evans-Pritchard distinguished between what the Azande ‘believe’, as in ‘Azande believe that some people are witches’ and what they ‘known’, the verb used to describe Azande leechcraft (their medical knowledge of diseases and healing).
- He organised his monograph on Zande witchcraft “around a distinction between ideas that accord with objective reality...and those that do not; the language of knowledge is used to describe the former, the language of belief the latter” (Bryan Good, 1994, p.13).
- Can we distinguish between ‘belief’ and knowledge?
- Can ‘objective reality’ be so easily equated with Western science?

Religion and Western science

“For fundamentalist Christians, salvation is often seen to follow from belief, and mission work is conceived as an effort to convince the natives to give up their beliefs and take on a set of beliefs that will produce a new life and ultimate salvation. Ironically, quite a-religious scientists and policy makers see a similar benefit from correct belief. Educate the public about the hazards of drug use, our current Enlightenment theory goes...get them to believe in the right thing and the problem will be licked. Educate the patient, medical journals advise clinicians, and solve the problems of noncompliance that plague the treatment of chronic disease...get people to believe the right thing and our public health problems will be solved. Salvation from drugs and from preventable illness will follow from correct belief.” (Good, 1994, p.7)

Documentary on Evans-Pritchard's anthropological work

- If you want to see a BBC fifty minute Documentary (part of the BBC series *Strange Beliefs*) about Edward Evans-Pritchard and his anthropological and ethnographic fieldwork among the Azande and the Nuer of the Southern Sudan, paste the following link into You Tube:
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8q9HyO_NL_10

Further Reading

- Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006 (first edn. 2000): especially Chapter 8: Witchcraft and the Evil Eye.
- E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Oracles, Witchcraft and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976 (first edn. 1937).
- E.E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Levy-Bruhl's theory of primitive mentality,' *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts* (Egyptian University, Cairo), 2.
- Byron J. Good, *Medicine, Rationality and Experience: an Anthropological Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Lucien Levy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985 (first published in 1910)
- Lucien Levy-Bruhl, *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1975 (first published in 1949)
- Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.