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WITCHCRAFT

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THERE are few, if any, African societies which do not believe in witchcraft of one type or another. These types can be classified and their areas of distribution marked out. Thus we have the 'evil eye' type, the *likundu* type, and the *kindoki* type, and doubtless other variations could be distinguished. But though some notion which we can describe as a belief in witchcraft is found in maybe every African society it is far from playing a uniform part in each. In many communities, including the one from which the information used in this paper was gathered, witchcraft is a function of a wide range of social behaviour, while in others it has little ideological importance. In this paper my conclusions about the social relations of the witchcraft concept are drawn from twenty months experience of the Azande nation of the Nile-Uelle divide, where witchcraft is a ubiquitous notion. Whether what is true of this people is true of many other African communities I cannot say.

There is much loose discussion about witchcraft. We must distinguish between bad magic (or sorcery) and witchcraft. Many African peoples distinguish clearly between the two and for ethnological purposes we must do the same. Witchcraft is an imaginary offence because

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it is impossible. A witch cannot do what he is supposed to do and has in fact no real existence. A sorcerer, on the other hand, may make magic to kill his neighbours. The magic will not kill them but he can, and no doubt often does, make it with that intention. This paper deals with witchcraft and not with sorcery.

The notion of witchcraft clearly has value. Zande culture as constituted at present and in the past could not have existed without it. The vast knowledge of magic possessed by the Azande would have been useless since its main purpose is to counteract witchcraft. Their elaborate hierarchy of oracles would have been likewise useless because their chief object is to reveal witches. Their thriving corporation of witch-doctors would have been without aim. For witchcraft, magic, witch-doctors, and oracles are all functions of each other and are meaningless if deprived of their interrelations. But these notions are also an essential concomitant to social organization. For example: the patrilineal kin are a blood-revenge group and mutual-assistance group in paying compensation for homicide. Now practically every death is due to witchcraft and must be avenged. One does not need to ask whether it is due to witchcraft, for this is known in advance and one merely seeks the name of the murderer. The cohesion of the kin is largely due to its co-operative activity as a blood-revenge and mutual-assistance group, and in a politically developed society in which real murder is of the rarest occurrence the notion of witchcraft is an essential alternative.

The power of the chiefs is also based to a great extent upon their control of the oracles, which are the only means of discovering the names of witches responsible for deaths. Hence vengeance can only be accomplished through the medium of the chief's oracles. Even spacial distribution is partly a consequence of belief in witchcraft, since men will only live in sites about which the oracles are favourable and they prefer to live as far removed from their neighbours as possible because witchcraft is less dangerous at a distance. Hence there are no villages but only homesteads.

These examples will suffice to show how important are notions of witchcraft in the social life of the Azande.

Notions of witchcraft comprise natural and moral philosophies. As a natural philosophy it reveals a theory of causation. Misfortune is due

to witchcraft co-operating with natural forces. If a buffalo gores a man, or the supports of a granary are undermined by termites so that it falls on his head, or he is infected with cerebro-spinal meningitis, Azande say that the buffalo, the granary, and the disease, are causes which combine with witchcraft to kill a man. Witchcraft does not create the buffalo and the granary and the disease for these exist in their own right, but it is responsible for the particular situation in which they are brought into lethal relations with a particular man. The granary would have fallen in any case, but since there was witchcraft present it fell at the particular moment when a certain man was resting beneath it. Of these causes the only one which permits intervention is witchcraft, for witchcraft emanates from a person. The buffalo and the granary do not allow of intervention and are, therefore, whilst recognized as causes, not considered the socially relevant ones.

At the same time there are situations in which some other cause in a number of interacting causes is recognized as the socially relevant one and witchcraft is no longer emphasized as a causal factor. Thus any error in agriculture, hunting, crafts, which might have been avoided if the person concerned had had more knowledge and experience, is put down to incompetence. Likewise moral shortcomings are not considered due to witchcraft and this excuse would not be permitted in defence of lying, adultery, and disloyalty. Similarly breach of taboo leads to failure of an undertaking without the concept of witchcraft being evoked.

As a system of moral philosophy notions of witchcraft define the moral sentiments and have great influence upon conduct. For witchcraft is not a random force which strikes here and there without design. Any one may be a witch but it is of no importance so long as he does not direct his powers against his neighbours, and he will only do this when motivated by hatred, jealousy, envy, greed, and so forth. Azande are explicit on this point. They say that these sentiments go ahead and that witchcraft follows after them, meaning that they are the origin of every act of witchcraft. Hence they may be regarded as diagnostic of witchcraft in a person and a man who wishes to avoid suspicions of witchcraft must refrain from displaying ill-will towards his neighbours. Moreover, the man who quarrels with his neighbours and speaks ill of them is the man whose name these neighbours will

place before the oracles when they are sick, so that there is a tendency for socially undesirable members of a community to be also its acknowledged witches. This holds true generally for Zande society if we remember that the noble class and, to a lesser degree, the rich and powerful among commoners are immune from accusations.

Even in the past, unless witches had actually committed murder they were left in peace, and when proved guilty of murder were rarely executed but were allowed to pay compensation. To-day witches are not subject to any penalty because British government will not recognize that death can be caused by witchcraft. Azande indeed believe that witches who kill people die from magic made to avenge them, but it need hardly be said that their belief is baseless. To-day the whole procedure of vengeance is carried out to everybody's satisfaction on a mystical plane. A man is killed by witchcraft; magic is made to avenge him; some one else in the neighbourhood dies and the oracles declare that he has died as a result of the magic. The relatives of this man in their turn make magic, and so it goes on. Every one is satisfied at avenging his kin and nobody is any the worse off.

Nevertheless people are daily accused of lesser acts of witchcraft directed against others with the object of causing them sickness or of frustrating their economic and social undertakings, and it is of some interest to inquire what is the position of a man so accused. He suffers very little inconvenience. When he is informed that the oracles have declared that he has bewitched a certain man he says that he is very sorry and is totally ignorant of having done so, blows some water from his mouth in sign of goodwill, and the matter is closed. Even notorious witches are in no way ostracized and are treated in exactly the same manner as any one else. On the whole they are perhaps treated with greater respect than other people. Azande are not really interested in who are and who are not witches. Any one may be a witch—it is immaterial whether he is one or not—but what is of importance is to know whether he is at the moment directing his witchcraft against you. Hence no one asks the oracles whether so-and-so is a witch but only whether his witchcraft is causing a certain man to be ill at the time. In so far as there is any disgrace attached to being habitually accused of witchcraft it is due to the belief that the man is always jealous of his neighbours and wishes them harm, which is

unworthy of a good citizen. In any case it is no crime to bewitch a man so long as you do not murder him, so a witch is left in peace.

To understand witchcraft we have to view it in relation to (*a*) the particular situation that evokes the notion and (*b*) the social relations between a man and the witch accused of molesting him. Sickness, failure, and injury of all kinds evoke at once the notion of witchcraft, but it is still a generalized notion and has to be particularized by being personified if it is to permit intervention. This is done by asking the oracles who is the witch who is causing the trouble. But one does not place names of people before the oracles in a haphazard manner. One selects only the names of those with whom one is on bad terms. Hence every time an accusation of witchcraft is made it refers to two things: some misfortune which evokes the notion of witchcraft and some enmity which evokes the name of the witch accused.

I will restrict myself here to two comments upon the ethical side of the problem. It is evident that no European government will permit persons to be punished for imaginary offences. The question is not whether witchcraft should be regarded as a crime but whether it is a fact. In my experience the proofs that a witch has performed any action designed to kill another are entirely of a mystical order.

I may add that the common discussion whether sorcerers ought to be punished under European rule is, in my opinion, lacking in appreciation of the conditions under which an act of sorcery is carried out in Africa. Either magic is made so openly that there can be no doubt that its action has the moral support of the community or so secretly that it is almost impossible to produce proofs other than the mystical revelations usually cited by Africans as such.

In the second place I venture to suggest that beliefs and behaviour are so closely interrelated that very little progress is made towards convincing Africans of the imaginary character of witchcraft until the institutions which are bound up with these beliefs have deteriorated or at least are rendered inoperative (as in the case with children brought up at mission stations who afterwards do not resume the social life of their people). To reason against African belief in witchcraft is useless because intellectually it is perfectly coherent. People do not easily surrender beliefs which they are compelled to express in

their daily behaviour and we have already noted how notions of witchcraft are essential to the maintenance of oracles and magic and the part they play in the preservation of morality, kinship, and political authority. In other words the question of how we shall treat witchcraft in African communities is part of the much larger problem of our attitude to African institutions in general. E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD.

Résumé

LA SORCELLERIE CHEZ LES AZANDÉ

Cet article se fonde sur des renseignements recueillis parmi les représentants du peuple Azandé habitant entre Nil et Ouellé; ils peuvent s'appliquer ou non à d'autres communautés. Deux types de sorcellerie sont à distinguer — la sorcellerie ('sorcery') qui est pratiquée avec l'intention arrêtée de tuer, et la sorcellerie ('witchcraft') qui n'existe que dans les idées du peuple. L'auteur parle ici du dernier type, et ce qui est important c'est que les Azandé, en tant que centre culturel et social, y croient fermement. Chaque mort est expliquée par la sorcellerie, et la découverte du coupable avec l'aide de la magie, d'oracles et de 'witch-doctors' est alors le devoir des parents du défunt. La cohésion de la parenté en ligne paternelle est largement due à la coopération qu'assurent ses membres comme groupe de vengeurs de sang et groupe d'assistance mutuelle. Les idées sur la sorcellerie comportent une philosophie naturelle et morale. La première admet l'idée de causalité: la sorcellerie se combine avec les forces naturelles pour faire le mal, mais c'est la seule cause qui puisse être découverte parce qu'elle est le fait d'une personne. La sorcellerie étant un instrument dans la main des individus plutôt qu'une force abstraite a aussi son importance dans le domaine moral. D'autre part la sorcellerie ayant à l'origine le mauvais vouloir, il suffit que l'on soit manifestement bien disposé à l'égard de ses voisins pour éviter les soupçons. De petits actes de sorcellerie ne sont pas considérés comme des infractions graves, tandis que le meurtre doit être vengé par une contre-action. Les Européens ont à se demander, non pas si la sorcellerie est un crime, mais si c'est un fait. L'auteur pense d'après son expérience personnelle que les preuves permettant l'inculpation sont en général d'ordre mystique. Mais la croyance en la sorcellerie est si étroitement unie avec la conduite qu'elle doit sans doute coexister avec toutes les institutions africaines en général.