The innocent sorcerer; coping with evil in two African societies, Kapsiki and Dogon

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Plate 11–1. Amaga, a shaman, performs the *bulo*, the main new year festival of the Dogon, in Mali. An outsider in some ways in Dogon society, his divinatory and diagnostic expertise, and his contacts with the spirits make him a necessary intermediary for his village in guarding against and warding off evil. During this large communal ritual, aimed at cleaning the ritual slate for the next year, his role is very prominent—even to the point of conspicuously "showing off ", as he does here.

11

The Innocent Sorcerer:

Coping with Evil in Two African Societies (Kapsiki & Dogon)

Walter E.A. van Beek

Case 1: The Infertile Wife (Kapsiki)[1]

TERI KWATCHA EXPLAINS his problems to his friend, the blacksmith/diviner Cewuve. "You know my second wife, Kwaberhe Kwampa, the one from Rhumsu (a neighboring village). I married her some ten years ago, as a *kwatewume* [run-away-wife] and gave a lot for the bridewealth already, as the first husband claimed his orignal bridewealth. She is a good wife; she ran away to another village only once, and she returned after two weeks. She finds no rest here, as she is still not pregnant, and never has been. We have consulted the crab [divination] many times and got various answers. Can you tell us why her belly stays empty?" Cewuve puts the crabfish in the pot, inside the neat arrangement of straws and calabash sherds, and asks the little animal: "Crab from the pot, crab from the pot, do tell us why this woman is sterile; tell the truth". The answer is distilled from the havoc wrought by the animal in the small confines of the pot. Several sessions are needed to come to a more or less clear answer, and finally the smith concludes: "Maybe they told you that someone near her was responsible, a woman [*mete*, "witch"] blocking her fertility or so, or that the jealousy was the cause. Not so. Your wife is *ndegema* [not in harmony with the supernatural world]. It is not a person who harmed her nor a *ndebeshèngu* [sorcerer]; it is *ndrimike* [badness]. Her *shala* [personal god] has done it, so a sacrifice is called for. Take a black male goat, and have her leave for the bush with a blacksmith. Out in the bush the blacksmith breaks the legs of the goat and leaves it there. Then she returns home. You may hold a house sacrifice then [a ritual in which red beer is brewed, a goat slaughtered, and a meal held with the neighbors and clansmen]".[2]

Teri Kwatcha goes home in a pensive mood. Usually Cewuve shows himself a very cautious diviner, quite pessimistic in his outlook and his forecasting. He always predicts bad things to happen, and that is good. Bad things not only do happen, they are the only real things, the real events. This cautious optimism gives food for thought.

Teri decides to see Kweji Xake, one of the principal healers of the village. Kweji agrees with the crab (of course) that *shala* may be the cause but suggests another possible explanation. "Maybe, Teri, not your wife but you are *ndegema*. A long time ago you came to my father (Vandu, now deceased) for *rhwè* [medicine, magic] to marry a wife. He gave you the one to "catch" a wife, and the manner to keep that wife at home. But he never gave you the *rhwè* that comes with it. For anyone who marries his wife with "means" runs the risk of making her sterile. So you come with me and I will give you *rhwè* to heal that sterility". Teri accepts Kweji's medicine, which he must apply to his wife without her knowledge. The small bundle of grasses has to be buried at the doorstep of her hut, as well as under the spot she puts her jars.

Back home Teri ponders his own protective *rhwè*: his protection in war, against burglary in the compound (the thief will forget to steal once he is in the house) and—most important of all—his *sekwa* [a ritual means of enforcing the payment of debts]. All these "means" of protection may "attack" the people in the house, and his second wife's sterility may stem from the dangers inherent in *sekwa,* too. Teri decides to remove his *sekwa*, as the most potent of all *rhwè,* from the house. After putting Kweji's medicine on the spots indicated by the specialist, he leaves the house with his *sekwa* bundle of medicine under his clothes and hides it somewhere in the bush.

When his wife returns home (she had been to the market of Rhumsu, her native village, to sell some beans), he tells her about his visit to the diviner Cewuve, promising her a black billy goat for the sacrifice and a house sacrifice later on.

Teri's wife, after all these attentions, in fact did get pregnant. About a year later she gave birth to twins, one of which died.

Plate 11–2. Sacrificial jars, center of rituals for Kapsiki who live in northern Cameroon.

Case 2: Protecting the House (Dogon)[3]

In the village of Tireli, at the foot of the Bandiagara escarpment, Dogolu Say pays a visit to Mèninyu, his father-in-law. Leaving his shoes outside the gate, Dogolu cautiously enters the compound; Mèninyu not only is the father of his second wife, but also a renowned ritual specialist. After the lengthy salutation, Dogolu waits till Mèninyu has finished a chiropractic session on a neighbor who just had a nasty fall, all the while chatting with the patient. When alone with Mèninyu and following the usual small talk, Dogolu comes to the point. He is building a new house for Atimè, his friend from abroad who has come to live in the village. "You know, people will come and look in the house, maybe will dream about it. They will speak about him and me. Words will be there, words will rise, and as you know the words of the mouth [*anga tĩ*] you may help me". Of course, Mèninyu knows exactly what Dogolo means: people will be jealous and even give vent to their jealousy, so the harmony between Dogolu and his clanbrothers will be disrupted. "I will give you some *ginu dom* [means to protect the house]", he assures Dogolu, "but be sure that you and your guest do the "guard the head" [*ku domonu*, sacrifice for protection] later at my altar". Dogolu agrees and asks also for special protection for the open space of the compound; for many visitors will come there, and many words will be spoken in the open air.

A few days later after sunset Dogolu buries the protection of the house at the spot where the threshold will be. It is a piece of cord with three strands, white, blue and black, with twenty-eight knots, for which he will give Mèninyu a gift of 3,000 CFA (about $12) later on. He knows Mèninyu well enough to be sure nobody in Tireli will be aware of the proceedings. If not, he would have gone to another village. In fact, he does have a second protection, bought in Nakomo (a neighboring village), which will be put just above the door inside the main hut. It has cost him 10,000 CFA, money he considers well spent. He knows how to make some protection himself, but only against a specific threat: against a special kind of *dugugonu* [sorcerer]. What he needed here is a more general protection that also works against Christians and Muslims. The various diviners he consulted did agree on the villages where he could find materials to protect his house: Tireli and Nakomo.

When Atimè arrives, Dogolu takes to Mèninyu a cock, a hen, some other foodstuffs, and seasoning. On Amagoro, a powerful altar that has been served by the lineage of Mèninyu since times of old, the father-in-law of Dogolu then performs the sacrifice "to guard the head". This specific sacrifice is not eaten: after being grilled and seasoned, the meat is stacked away under a heap of stones. If anyone should even taste it, he or she would drop dead instantly. Mèninyu tells Atimè of a Fulani herdsman who did not believe this taboo. He partook of the meat, started down for the valley, and died within the perimeter of the village. Mèninyu also explains that the secret of the magical means does not reside in the things one uses—like the three-stranded string—but in the words spoken into it. One has to know the *anga tĩ* [words of the mouth] in order to be effective. Anyone who knows the words can perform it.

Now the house is well protected against intruders, against a great variety of dangers: witches [*yadugonu*], who will put poison [*dugo*] in the water; sorcerers

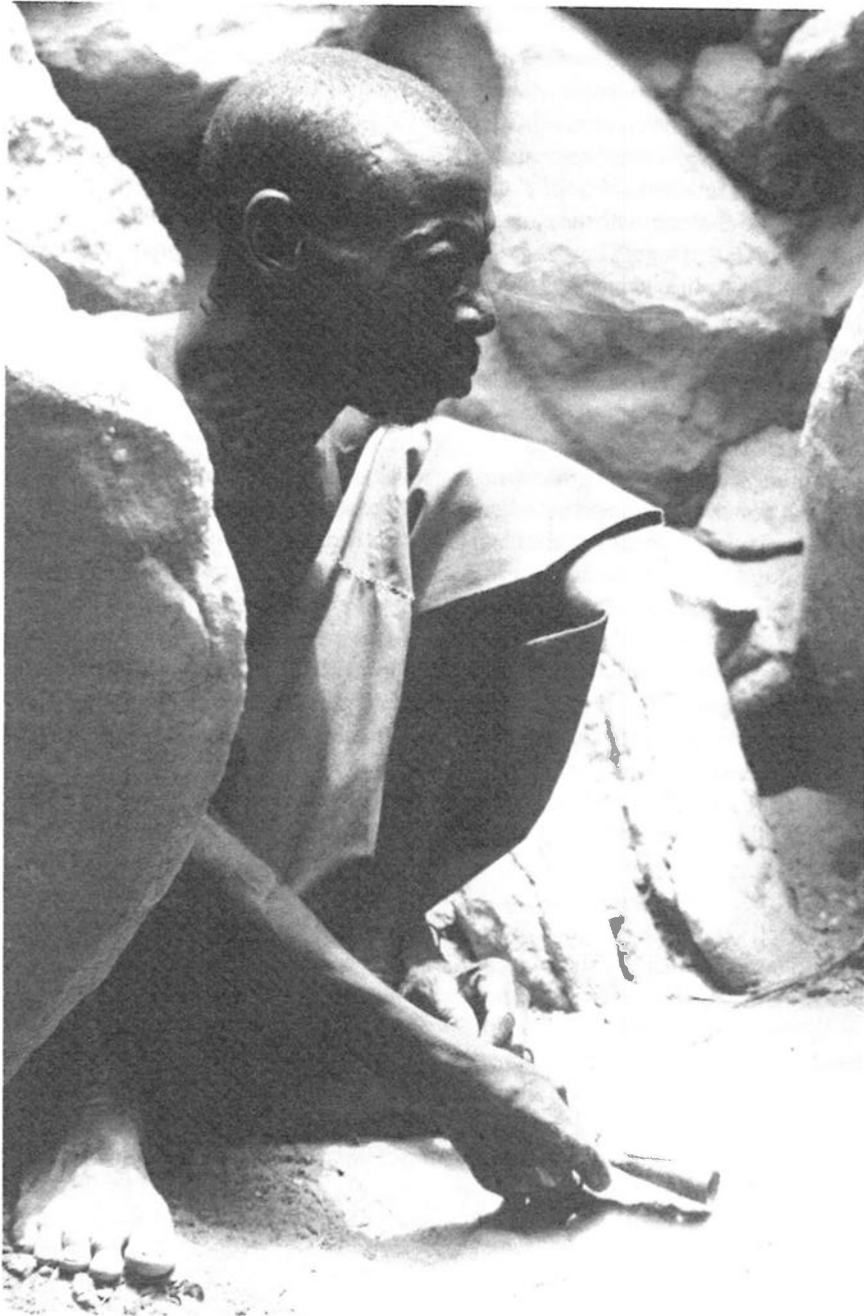

Plate 11–3. Mèningu, the Dogon father-in-law in "Case 2", invokes the supernatural world to "protect the house". He strikes a small iron adze on the rock and intones the long ritual text that exorts the gods, spirits, and ancestors to care for and look after the owner of the altar.

Plate 11–4. Yèngulu, a friend of Mèningu, following the intoned text (Plate11–3), performs the sacrifice with the blood of a chicken.

[*dudugonu*], who will send their chains to poison food or drink; Muslim marabouts, who are considered very potent; and Christians, who may have evil eyes. Nobody knows specifically which person is dangerous. With a good protection nobody is worried any longer; but the danger can stem from anybody, especially someone very near. Lest the protection abates, Dogolu and Atimè never speak about it (though they may indicate its presence with a small bronze plaque on the threshold) and should beware of menstruating women stepping over it: one of the two *ginu dom* is of the kind that is spoiled by the presence of menstrual blood. Still, it would be a good idea to have one's own *ama* [altar] in the compound. A regular sacrifice on an often-used compound altar will reinforce the protection gained elsewhere, since an altar that is frequently used for sacrifices becomes a protective power in itself.

Kapsiki: Evil from All Sides

Evil has many faces. In the next two sections, I explore the threats the Kapsiki and Dogon perceive in their social environment and their notion of evil. For the Kapsiki, one should discern between those ills and evils that come from people and those that come from *shala* [god]. The first source usually is called *ndrimike* [badness], but in the problems stemming "from god" this term does not apply. The notion *shala* has many meanings besides that of the "personal god"; it can also imply a place, a mythical snake, or a certain kind of illness, all closely associated with "god" (van Beek 1987). As usual in African religion, the main supernatural being is ethically neutral. No evaluations are ever made concerning the events that are deemed his work. *Shala menete* ["God has done it"] is a standard phrase of resignation. The Kapsiki are confident that ultimately their interest and that of their *shala* will run parallel, but at a given moment one can never be sure of the positive influence of their *shala*. Even more ambivalent is the relationship between an individual and someone else's *shala*: the Kapsiki, with their individualistic orientation, consider the well-being of someone's *shala* as potentially a threat towards another person.

An individual can fall out of grace with his or her personal god in many ways, but some kinds of falling out can come from breaking taboos. A fair number of actions are taboo, ranging from forbidden sexual relations to slaughtering a pregnant goat or having a cock crow on one's granary. Not all these actions can be prevented, but they still call for reparation. Without reparations, several kinds of bad things can happen: illness, infertility (as in our example), bad luck in trading or in cultivation. No specific threat is associated with *shala*. Protection as such is not possible—careful living is called for. If mishaps occur, divination should indicate the source of the trouble.

Shala-related beings may be dangerous too: Va, the personification of the rain, and Veci, the sun, can be encountered in person, which calls for a sacrifice. These beings are relevant in very special situations only, like drought, and then are dealt with collectively, either in a rain-sacrifice or in communal rituals. Also related are the spirits that roam in the *gutuli* [bush], which can possess a person, leading to insanity. Against these, special *rhwè*, known only to very few specialists, must be applied (van Beek 1978:394).

Apart from *shala*, some other dangers lurk in the "other side of the world". Death and some illnesses (measles and smallpox) are conceived of as persons. However, against these, practically no *rhwè* exists. Some specialists claim *rhwè* against smallpox or measles, but no one can resist Mte[death]. In fact, the futile fight against Mte and the failure of the many ruses to escape from him form the backbone of Kapsiki mythology. Just as the people of old tried in vain to escape or conquer death, no contemporary Kapsiki can hope to put it off. And so against these three no real protection exists, only acceptance.

A second category of mishaps coming from outside bears no close relationship to *shala*. Included here are the many epidemics, which are not personified, such as malaria, meningitis, or dysentery. Against these, various *rhwè* exist, some of them well known, others secret knowledge for the specialists. Sometimes women's sterility is considered among these epidemics, but more often this has other origins (as in Case 1). Usually the symptoms are clear and well known. In addition, the many ways in which *rhwè* and other ritually important objects can attack people are considered a threat from beyond, like the threat the *sekwa* posed for the people in Teri's compound. These objects, like neolithic remains of former populations, may be used in a variety of ways for the well-being of the owner. All of them, however, may present some danger to the owners. In Kapsiki, no blessing is ever free; what one gains in a special way beyond the average situation will have to be paid for elsewhere. Usually these "blessings" shorten one's life span.

Far more important as a focus of ritual attention are the many ways evil can stem from human beings. No clear distinction can be made between natural and supernatural threats, but three human sources of evil can be discerned: bad characters, people with the "evil eye", and "spirit walkers".

First, there are people who have a bad or special *mehele* [character or spirit]. The witches [*mete*] are the clearest example. A witch is someone (male or female) who inherits a special deviant type of *shinankwe* [shadow]. At night it leaves the sleeping body through the anus and roams in the bush, red like fire, as a kind of wild cat. It eats the shadows of sleeping children's hearts. The victims, when waking up, feel weak and become ill. Unless the *mete* drops the shadow of the heart, the victim will die.

Witchcraft is deemed to be inherited matrilineally (in a strictly patrilineal kinship system). The Kapsiki on the whole are well aware of who are *mete*. Most witches, however, are not "active"; jealousy, ire, or lust for vengeance set the involuntary processes of the witchcraft in motion. So witches are more or less responsible for their vile acts; it is their *fete* [fault]. However, not every witch is known as such. One major risk for the village resides in strangers coming. These strangers, because of virilocal residence, tend to be women. Often, in-marrying women are hardly known at all, so it is possible for a witch to be among them. This is probably one reason that women are deemed to be witches more often than men. Many folktales warn the young and eager man against the dangers of the beautiful but unknown wife coming into the village for marriage.

Kapsiki divination may indicate that a certain illness is the result of *mete* activities but cannot indicate which activity. There are no high-status diviners in

Kapsiki society, as there are elsewhere in Africa. This lack of pronounced hierarchy among diviners ties in with the acephalous juro-political organization of the Kapsiki, in which pronouncing a judgment over other people is very difficult to do. The usual reaction, after the crab has indicated witchcraft, is to cry into the dark of the night, "Let go, let the heart go". It is hoped that the witch will then fear detection and return the shadow of the heart.

Essential in these matters is that the *mete* in question be someone close, either a close kinsman, a wife, or co-wife. Witchcraft, as nearly always is the case in Africa, is the "enemy within the gates". If someone, either a known witch or a newly arrived wife, is suspected of taking the shadow of a child's heart, the sick child is put before her in the full presence of as many people as possible, saying: "Here it is. Do eat the rest now". Formerly, if the child died, the witch was chased from the village and her ears were cut off. Since colonial days, the government no longer allows this, and so the witches proliferate. (In recent years, however, accusations of witchcraft have regained acceptance to the Cameroonian courts.)

Although treatment of *mete* infliction may be limited, protection is normal and easy to obtain. Everybody knows some protective medicine, and each blacksmith can furnish the *rhwè* needed for a newborn baby.

Kapsiki society is not a witch-ridden society; the number of accusations is very small and relatively few illnesses are attributed to witches. Children are deemed to be about the only possible victims for *mete*, and of children's plights only the combination of diarrhea without blood, fever, and much urinating (more or less the symptoms for a Western medical diagnosis of bacterial dysentery) point to *mete* influence.

Another kind of harmful people are the men or women with the "evil eye" [*hweteru*]. Their spirits roam the village at night—in no specified form—and suck blood from people and animals. These victims do not die, but become unproductive. These *hweteru* act so from sheer spite and jealousy; they are deemed to be in command of their bad shadow, inherited matrilineally. In this case, people generally do not know who is *hweteru* in the village. There is no known cure, only protection against them, that is very easy to obtain: a common plant species gives fair protection. However, it remains important not to foster jealousy: anything nice or beautiful must be hidden from view.

A third kind of special people, though much less harmful, are the "spirit walkers" [*kelèngu*]. Their shadow leaves them at night, in their own image, and joins colleagues in the village. Together, their shadows are believed to go on noble exploits like stealing sorghum in enemy fields or waging war against the spirit walkers of neighboring villages. When they steal the shadow of the harvest, they put it with their own crops; as a result their supply of grains seems interminable. Their main thrust is against other villages, so people do not consider the *kelèngu* as shameful or evil and therefore freely speak about them. This *mehele* [character] is inherited from father to only one son, and the spirit walkers can be recognized by their thin linear somatic type; they explain their own thinness by their overdose of activity: "We are never at rest; we work during the day and steal at night". As protection, one must shield one's fields from the *kelèngu* of other villages. Some medicinal plants offer this protection, as does a thorn hedge or a

row of a black sorghum variety around the field. The *kelèngu* sometimes are aware of future events, a domain in which their authority is uncontested, which is one reason they are sometimes dubbed "clairvoyants" in the literature. Whatever they see happen in the spirit world will happen shortly after in the daily world. When they kill people among themselves in their battles, that spirit walker will die within a few days. No medicine will help. Women may be walkers too, for any war has to have its spectators.

Special circumstances at birth may indicate a threat too, usually not for any specific individual, but for the whole community. Twins, breech birth, a child born with the caul, or one conceived without preceding menstruation, all imply their specific threat for either the parents or the whole village, ranging from drought to the death of the father before the child's initiation. In all these cases a small ritual is indicated to take away the bad luck or danger; though all these rites are different, they all are well known and relatively simple.

It is not only people who are inherently different that pose a threat to the individual. A large danger comes from overt actions of people, whether they are specialists or not. The most harmful people are those who practice *beshèngu* ["black magic"], the epitome of evil in Kapsiki society. This magic is practiced by someone who aims at harming others, killing, or rendering infertile. It is evil because it harms and because it intrudes. The term *beshèngu* denotes not a specific object or combination of things, but a great number of different ways of harming other people. Some of those are well known (for example, the whiskers of the leopard); others are very secret and known to the specialist.

Beshèngu is a specialist's job, done professionally by blacksmiths mainly, the ritual intermediaries par excellence in Kapsiki culture. A number of ways to make the *beshèngu* itself are recounted by the Kapsiki, all in the most general terms, because everybody emphatically wants to disclaim having any such knowledge. The main fascination centers on the distribution of *beshèngu*: sorcerers are reputed to train flies to bring the *beshèngu* over to their victims, they bury it in the footpaths, or they change themselves into flying creatures in order to administer their wares. The Kapsiki are sure that all "important" men do have such a *beshèngu* bought from a specialist in another village. However, it is not the possession of *beshèngu* that is evil, but its use. One may defend oneself against possible attack; some kinds of *beshèngu* can be used for protection. In many ritual texts and public discussions, curses are formulated against the users: "Anyone who walks with *beshèngu* [i.e., who carries it with him in order to use it], let him drop dead in his tracks". Still, according to some informants, those curses were often mouthed by the very people who at least owned the stuff.

The threat of use does not come from inside the compound, as does witchcraft; people think of this kind of sorcery as coming from outside; however, it does not really come from far away either. *Beshèngu* is, in the ideas of the Kapsiki, sought after by people who are kinsmen, probably agnates, who are jealous of their clan- and lineage-brothers or interested in their misfortune. A large inheritance may trigger the use or accusations of *beshèngu*, usually between the agnates competing for the inheritance.

Treating the resulting illness is difficult and must be done by the same type of specialist who can perform the harmful magic. These rites are very secret. The information available on this protection indicates that the content of the rites is highly idiosyncratic, varying from specialist to specialist. It also is independent of tribal identity: knowledge of magic easily transcends the tribal boundaries; in fact, specialists far away always are deemed more powerful and potent than those nearby.

Protection against *beshèngu* is more important than treatment, and it constitutes an important focus of daily Kapsiki religion. One must live carefully, especially when one has gained some social prominence, in order to minimize the dangers. Protection against this threat, which is difficult to realize in any way, focuses on the protection against infection: how to keep the trained flies away, how to protect the compound against flying creatures. Constant vigilance is needed, and the protection against *beshèngu* must be kept in good shape.

As with any activity aimed at the supernatural, the use of *beshèngu* carries a risk. When an untimely death occurs, people may suspect a sorcerer, in which case the *wuta*-ritual is performed, a complicated affair that takes one of the relatives of the deceased to a village far away. The culprit is ritually killed in a large pot [*wuta*]. Afterwards the relative lets the village know that he has "gone to *wuta*" and waits for the culprit to die. The next death is interpreted as the result of this ritual. The culprit then is buried without any public mourning. However, there

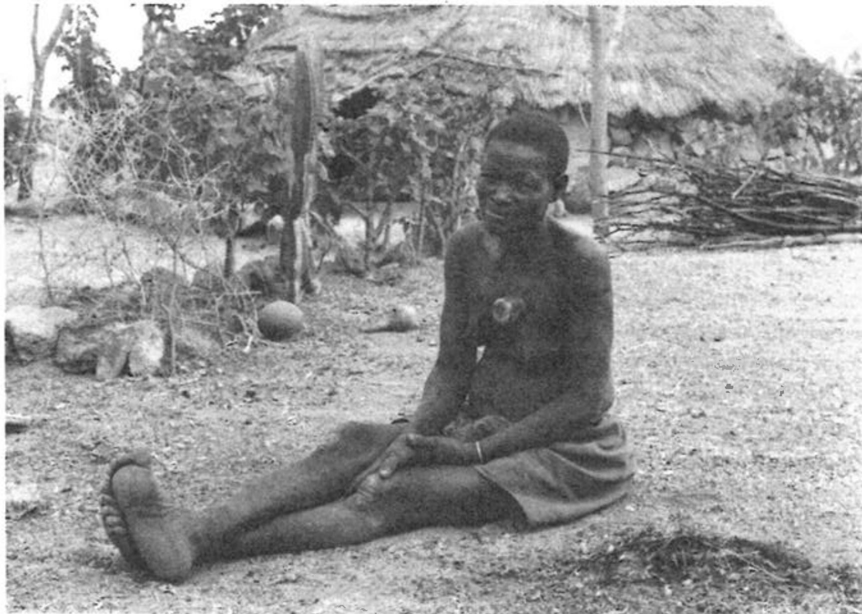

Plate 11–5. Pulling out evil (blood): a blacksmith's client. Kuafashe has been suffering from headaches and has gone to see the blacksmith Cewuve, who, like most of his professional colleagues, is considered an able herbalist and doctor. Based upon a standard Kapsiki definition and diagnosis of her illness, he has applied a small heated bottle to her chest in order to rid her of excess evil blood.

is danger of contamination. Close kin of the culprit are considered in danger too, for the death by revenge resembles an epidemic, which will attack them also. A special ritual is performed to protect the culprit's kin from the rightful vengeance.

This epidemic nature of death by revenge, or death by one's own *fete* [fault], is central in another ritual, the *sekwa* mentioned in the example. In principle, *sekwa* is a means to ensure the repayment of debts: when someone refuses to repay a debt, the creditor may put his *sekwa* in the debtor's compound. Then death will strike that compound like an epidemic, wiping out the debtor's household as well as anyone who has ever eaten there. This *sekwa* is often used as a threat, but the threat is seldom carried out. It is considered a perfectly legitimate means for enforcing repayment, and neither its manufacture nor its possession or use bears any social stigma. *Sekwa* consists of a bundle of objects; its composition is well known to everyone. There is no remedy against its use except to pay the debts immediately. When *sekwa* is applied, it is put in the middle of the courtyard, visible to everyone. But things rarely go that far.

Another threat that has its origin in one's guilt is the curse *bedla*. When a close kinsman or kinswoman does not behave according to the rules of conduct—for example, does not show the proper respect for a mother's brother or a father—one may resort to a formal curse. This curse does not entail a great deal of ritual but is simply spoken: "If such and so has misbehaved against me in that manner, then she may not get pregnant anymore". A wide variety of afflictions can be administered in this way, and the closer the relationship between the parties, the more dangerous the curse is, the most feared curses coming from the mother and her brother. As the formula indicates, the curse is only effective in cases of factual and serious misbehavior. It can be eradicated by a simple ritual of blessing.

A final type of danger from people is the threat of war and theft. Both were rampant before the colonial pacification of the area, and protections against them are still important today. Magic for war, a prized possession of a few, is made by some specialist blacksmiths and has had to prove itself in battle. It usually consists of horns or an iron receptacle filled with an assortment of magic odds and ends, and it must be kept active by sacrifices. Famous war protection is known throughout the village.

Magic against theft is much more widespread and varied. Some plants offer protection, but sometimes complicated ritual patterns are needed. Here protection means attacking the culprit. A normal protection makes the thief forget his thieving intentions when he enters the compound; a better and more expensive one ruins the "head" of the thief, making him lose his way completely inside the house. The strongest medicine, however, kills the thief once he enters the house, especially if he climbs over the wall instead of entering through the only gate. After a theft, the thief may be cursed, and a fair number of afflictions are attributed to this retaliation. However, such curses may prove dangerous, as some close kinsmen may have appropriated the object in question and will be attacked by the curse.

Dogon: Evil Underground

Compared with the Kapsiki, the Dogon face a nameless, anonymous evil that has neither face nor familiarity[4]. Their supernatural world is populated by capricious

gods. Ama, the main deity, is depicted as essentially good, but not reliable: he always changes things. The many sacrificial texts at the communal rituals invoke this capriciousness, deploring the way Ama changes happy people into mourners, puts villagers in the bush and bush people in the village. Still, when asked, people insist that Ama is "good", even though the concepts of good or bad in fact do not apply to Ama. A number of spirits are associated with the sky and with rain; they share Ama's characteristics without his capriciousness.

Lèwè (in most literature "Lèbè"), represented as a snake in most myths, is Ama's earthly counterpart and receives a lot of ritual attention during the communal rites. Lèwè is both beneficial and dangerous; he is the adversary of Ama, but people do swear at his altar, for he can be severe in cases of false oaths. A group of spirits is associated with this chthonic aspect. The *atũwũnũ*, the *yebã,* and *yènè* and *yènèũ* each belong to a certain aspect of the physical environment: rocks, dunes, bush, and trees. They are described as spirits of diverse form, either as small human beings or as one-legged creatures. The first among them, the *atũwũnũ*, are considered the first inhabitants of the scree; animosity characterizes their relationship to the Dogon: they hit people with clubs and steal children. Protection is offered by simple sacrifices at certain spots, though the threat is not very prominent. The other spirits may also present a danger—often conceived in the form of insanity when people are attacked by them—but have contributed to Dogon life: for example, the ritual language of Dogon masks is of such spirit origin.

The most menacing Dogon deity is Nòmò, the water god. Feared as no other being, he does not command a great deal of ritual attention but is the main inspiration for some ritual specialists in Dogon, the shamanic priests [*binukèju*]. He too is a capricious god, ever changing his appearance and eager to trap people in the water. The fear of drowning is great in Dogon society, astonishingly so when one considers the dry Sahelian climate and the virtual absence of water during most of the year. Still, Nòmò and his familiars, like the crocodile, the sheath-fish, and water serpents command a deep respect. There is no known protection against this threatening side of Nòmò, but some small offerings are made to make him release his prey. Larger sacrifices and offerings are made by his people, the shamanistic priests.

The ancestors [*tire anaũ*] do not represent an important category in Dogon belief. They are invoked collectively in the communal rituals and do not represent any threat. Mishap does not stem from the ancestors, but from the gods or from living people. As intermediaries between man and Ama, the ancestors are of some importance, but Dogon religion cannot be properly termed an ancestor religion. Specially mentioned among the ancestors are the people who built the steep stairways that scale the high Bandiagara escarpment bifurcating Dogon territory, a great feat that is wholly positive. Without those stairs the Dogon would be bereft of half their communication with other villages.

Protection against Ama is impossible and not really necessary; against Lèwè, correct behavior and just oaths are sufficient; and against Nòmò protection is impossible. Ritual protection, however, is needed against the evil that stems from one's fellow humans. Compared with the Kapsiki, the threat from other people is

vague and diffuse in Dogon society. A general uneasiness characterizes Dogon interaction with strangers, though this uneasiness may never show through the outward veneer of hospitality and cordiality. Theirs is a harmony-oriented society, and any obvious breach in harmony is a serious problem. A central term is *dògò* [shame, loss of face]. Having to admit a fault in public; being exposed as a liar, a thief, or a witch; admitting that someone is not welcome; using the wrong term of address; not returning a greeting; or showing lack of respect for an elder—all these mistakes and transgressions cause *dògò*. This type of shame is unbearable for Dogon and may incite someone to suicide (often by jumping from a cliff); though not actually recommended, this action does meet with some approval.

The kind of evil that brings *dògò* is *sò* or *tĩ* [speaking, the word]. The word is the most powerful magical element among the Dogon. Speaking ill about someone means loss of face for him or her, as one should be "unspoken of". One who knows the world knows "his words" and keeps his tongue. In our Dogon example we saw Dogolu worrying about the possibility of being spoken about and taking measures accordingly by sacrificing on a powerful altar. Of course, people do gossip, but they are very careful in their actual wording as well as in their audience.

In theory this caution in speaking should not imply that people hide their thoughts. Hiding one's thoughts and feelings is also frowned upon. People who hide their feelings, never "declare" themselves, and do not really mingle with equals have a *bèrè gè* [a black belly]. Such people are not really concerned about their fellow humans: if they see a stray animal belonging to a neighbor, they will not warn the neighbor. The ideal is to have a "white belly and a white liver", that is, to have just and unshameful thoughts and be free with their expression. Severe *dògò* comes from being found out in public for shameful acts, so judgments are important and very sensitive events. The ultimate shame stems from being wrongly accused in public; in such a case, the "word is reverted", or suicide follows, or the person emigrates.

The word can hurt in yet a more insidious way. Though many words are used to describe magic in Dogon, a central term is *anga tĩ* or *anga sò* [the words of the mouth]. Protection or harm is done mainly by the words of the mouth: by reciting the spells one seals the words into the ritual object. Knots, locks, thongs, and other objects symbolizing the tying of words are important among the many objects used in Dogon magic. Despite the large number of material means, it is the knowledge of the words that counts. The words of the mouth can offer protection—mainly against similar magic—but, even without accompanying objects, they can be a threat; when directed against other people these words can make them ill (symptoms of desiccation and general apathy can be ascribed to this kind of magic) or make them fall from the mountainside. However, most applications of these spells alone are ethically neutral. Examples include enabling people to change their appearance when pursued by enemies or when stealing a wife from another village, winning a court case or preventing someone from lying, or winning a wrestling match. This whole complex usually is called *dauru*, and though people do hide their knowledge of it, they are not ashamed of it.

When the words are combined with objects, their effects multiply for good and evil. The regular sacrifices of the Dogon, which are a part of the great rituals of the

community, are words spoken over an altar (the word *ama* means both "altar" and "god"). Protection against evil, as in our example, consists of words spoken over a pot with objects or over a slaughtered chicken. The general term for the objects used in this kind of private ritual, and in fact a central term in Dogon religion, is *òmònò*. It has a wide range of meanings, from simply a sacrifice (also a communal one) to an object or bundle of objects used in private rituals and sacrifices. It is neither good nor bad. The *òmònò* can be a thing (e.g., a statue) sacrificed together with the regular *ama* altar or an object sacrificed separately to harm other people.

The rites in question are almost identical to the regular sacrifices: the *òmònò* is used together with the altar. Sometimes the actual *òmònò* is buried in the mud cone that forms the altar. The private rites among the Dogon do form a continuum with the communal ones. Likewise, *òmònò* that has been given much ritual attention becomes more potent, thus making the termination of its use difficult. The constant combination of words and objects, plus a long history of sacrifices, multiplies the efficacy of these procedures.

Evil also multiplies this way. The general Dogon term for an evil object, *dugo*, often is translated as "poison", but without words it would be powerless. *Dugo* is private, secret, and bad, aimed at killing people. Of what objects it consists is quite unclear. In fact, it is so evil that nobody can claim knowledge of it—it is of no use for protection. Two kinds of people use it, the male *dudugonu* ["sorcerers"] and the female *yadugonu*, which we will translate as "witches".

Sorcerers [*dudugonu*] are manipulators of evil. They have their *òmònò* objects on which they sacrifice often. Applying the "poison" to a chain with a set of pincers (see Plate 11–6), they send the appliance away with their "words". This chain proceeds on its own force and nips the victim, who then dies. Sometimes footpaths are infected with *dugo*, but this is not a threat that is widely felt. Another way of administering *dugo* is putting it under one's thumbnail, which can be put in the beer just before offering the calabash to some stranger.

Some protection against *dugo* is offered in politeness or in ritual. When offered a drink, one always lets the offerer drink first, a rule that is explained to outsiders as politeness but that has a protective value as well. Further protection is offered by

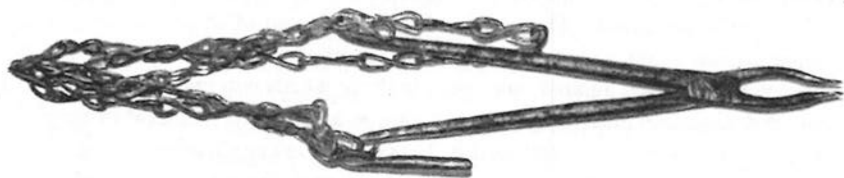

Plate 11–6. The "creeping evil": iron pincer and chain used in sending "poison". Collection: Herman Haan. A sorcerer, Dogon say, puts some of his strongest stuff on the pincer and then speaks the "*anga tĩ*" [words of the mouth]. Propelled by the power of the words, the pincer and chain are believed to creep through the bush towards the victim.

special objects in which the words of the mouth are knotted, like bracelets made of plaited cord. This kind of protection, again, is produced by specialists. In Dogon society these specialists are not the blacksmiths, but the ritual elders who are responsible for the regular religious practices. Among them, the shamanic *binu* priest can offer some protection through his sacrifices.

Dugo can be bought, though it is expensive (prices of 20,000 CFA [$40] are mentioned). According to informants, it is not even hard to obtain, but it must be bought in another village. Against *dugo* no treatment is known; a few medicines may give some initial relief, but eventually the victim will die. The main symptoms are a swollen abdomen and high fever.

Witches [*yadugonu*] work with *dugo* too, but in a wholly different way. They do not manipulate evil objects with words and other conscious acts; they are less than consciously subject to the evil when they do evil deeds. Witchcraft in Dogon could be partly defined as a proclivity to poison other people; a *yadugonu* feels compelled to put poison in other people's drinks or food. She thus presents a constant danger to strangers, kith and kin. According to the Dogon, children are the victims of witches' poisoning; child-rich mothers are very careful with their less fortunate sisters and, consequently, older childless women may be viewed suspiciously when they give attention to another woman's children.

Witches are ascribed another bewildering trait. Besides administering poison, they roam at night in the bush and jump on people who inadvertently come their way. Flying through the air with burning sticks in their hands, they land on the victim's head, sometimes urinate on him, paralyzing him for some hours, and rendering him incapable of speech (most victims are thought to be male). It is not the shadow of the witch that does this, but the witch herself. After a victim consults the shamanic priest, a ritual is performed as a remedy, of which an emetic is the central part. The patient then vomits a hairy worm, an act that immediately loosens up his tongue. Some people are reputed to be stronger than those flying witches and can stay on top of them for the whole night. In such cases the witches remain their friend. As witches, however, they may pass on his name to their colleagues who might try him out.

Dogon do not discuss or speak aloud the names of *dudugonu* or *yadugonu*, though some people may be suspected. Accusations are not voiced, nor does any kind of divination reveal their identity. According to the Dogon, the fox (the main intermediary for divination) would be afraid to do so lest the diviner be killed. The male sorcerers, who aim mostly at enemies, teach their trade to their sons, selecting the one who "knows his words". Female witchcraft is passed matrilineally from one *yadugonu* to her daughter or younger sister—not at birth but at the death of the old witch—and may lead to an unbroken chain of ten generations of witches. If a mother seeks to end her witchcraft, her daughters become infertile. Tales are told about rituals by witch collectives, similar to the communal sacrifices done by a family, in which both the witches and the sorcerers participate. The passing on of the witchcraft, consequently, is not deemed to be wholly involuntary; witches have to wish to become so. Once they have chosen the path of poison, and once the *dugo* resides in their granaries, the way back is very difficult.

As with the Kapsiki, Dogon society is not witch-ridden. The threats of evil are well concealed and do not figure prominently in communal life. Given the openness of the Dogon community and the demand for constant accessibility of everyone at any time, this is hardly surprising. The ties within and between the patrilineal and residential units are strong enough to put a firm lid on suspicions, tensions, and whisperings. Characteristically, "odd people", the ones with special potential and capacities, are either harmless or beneficial. The two endogamous groups within Dogon society, blacksmiths and tanners, have a ritual function couched in terms of blessing, never of harming people. The shamans, either male or female, have their own special niche in the great rituals, even if they do associate more closely than others with the dangerous elements of the supernatural world. An occasional clairvoyant who foretells the future is highly respected and is considered a welcome complement to the foretelling powers of the shaman or the fox and cowri diviners.

Besides these human-borne threats, the Dogon know their illnesses and environmental risks; however, these are not personalized. The treatment of illnesses is clearly differentiated from the protection against evil. Illnesses can be treated—evil cannot. The specialist in illness treatment, *jòjònguni*, usually is not considered a *dudugonu*, though some suspicions may surface. General risks, such as drought, plague, or war, are not considered an evil from outside but are things with which the capricious supernatural world plagues its underlings.

Communal Rites and the Negation of Evil

Our cases show how individuals among the Kapsiki and Dogon regulate their relations with each other as well as with a particular part of their perceived supernatural world. To understand and interpret these two encounters with evil, we must gain some insight into the structure of ritual and belief.

The concept of evil, a central notion in this chapter, is not a very common one in anthropological discourse. This concept stems from the phenomenology of religion (cf. Sharpe 1975) and has only recently been introduced into anthropological debates (Parkin 1985). The assumption is, of course, that the notion of evil is applicable outside the Judeo-Christian context, beyond the sphere of the "great traditions". As an emic theological or philosophical concept (Ricoeur 1969) it has to prove its cross-cultural validity. Here I am testing the productivity of this notion of evil in the indigenous African religions of the Kapsiki and Dogon. We will see that both religions feature notions analogous to the concept of evil; even where no generic local term is present, a cluster of notions purveys the same message. An opposition between good and evil, defined in whatever form, has been shown by structuralist studies (Schwimmer and de Josselin de Jong 1982), as well as structural semantics (van Beek 1975), to be present in many religions and worldviews. Given the near ubiquity of the opposition, it is probable that a notion or a cluster of concepts with the denotation of "evil" can be found in most religions.

Though we will focus on notions and rituals pertaining to protections against evil, Kapsiki and Dogon religions are not limited to this aspect. Both have a great number of important communal rituals that have attracted a fair amount of attention

in the literature. In these rites, too, people occupy themselves with the problem of evil (van Beek 1988a), but the focus is not so much on protection. Among both the Kapsiki and the Dogon the ultimate message of, for example, new year festivals and "rites of passage" is one of harmony, belonging, and group solidarity; differences between groups are played down in favor of unity. However, the two religions are not identical in this respect and their differences will be relevant for the protective rites too.

The great rituals among the Kapsiki stress this kind of togetherness very explicitly, strongly condemning any antisocial act or attitude that the participant may foster, like quarrelling. In this way endemic social problems will never show in ritual, for they might threaten the fabric of ritually induced harmony. For example, the great insecurity of men over the presence of their wives never surfaces in the rituals. Though the acquisition of wives is the dominant issue in the main new year festivals (van Beek 1987), the performance of the ritual gives the impression of an indissoluble link between husband and wife. Also, individualism is played down in ritual. While the ability to fight and to stand for one's own rights—to show fierceness combined with cunning—is highly appreciated in daily life, it is not during the special festival time of the ritual.

In the case of the Dogon the sense of harmony is very strong; overt harmony has absolute priority in interaction within the village. Individual differences are muted in daily life in favor of the smooth relations. However, in the rituals differences are accentuated: the young men parade before their own village half or ward, competing with their peers from the other half.

Thus the rituals are geared toward harmony and unity by controlling expressions of disunity. Types of behavior that threaten disunity vary between the two cultures. Against the Kapsiki trend of social fragmentation, the need for unity must be voiced by denying some central values concerning the right of expression, mainly by curbing individualism. For the Dogon the all-too-human desire to stand out among one's peers, to show off in front of an appreciating audience (Plate 11–1, p. 196), is to be curbed in daily life but finds expression and its catharsis in ritual (van Beek 1991c). So in its rituals the society shows itself as it is not, in order to reaffirm and revitalize its perceived model. In this way the great rituals are comparable to theater: they conjure up a vision of society with the inherent bias and distortion (and counterpoint) that are essential for its functioning. They reproduce society by redefining it, negating some of its basic premises (van Beek 1991b).

In this dialectical process one major element seems to be lacking: the notion of evil. The rituals mentioned above refer to harmony with the supernatural world and to the disturbance human action may create, but they do not point at any outside agent of evil or at any inherent notion of evil as incorporated in human beings. The human faults and mistakes referred to are of a fairly innocent nature: people following their idiosyncratic needs and wishes, putting individual interest above the common good. In both religions, however, a notion of independent evil does exist—in human nature or from outside agents, or of a more vague notion of damaging influence. And, as our two opening cases show, this influence can be fairly important. The antinomial side of social life does not surface in the great rituals of the Kapsiki and the Dogon; in fact,

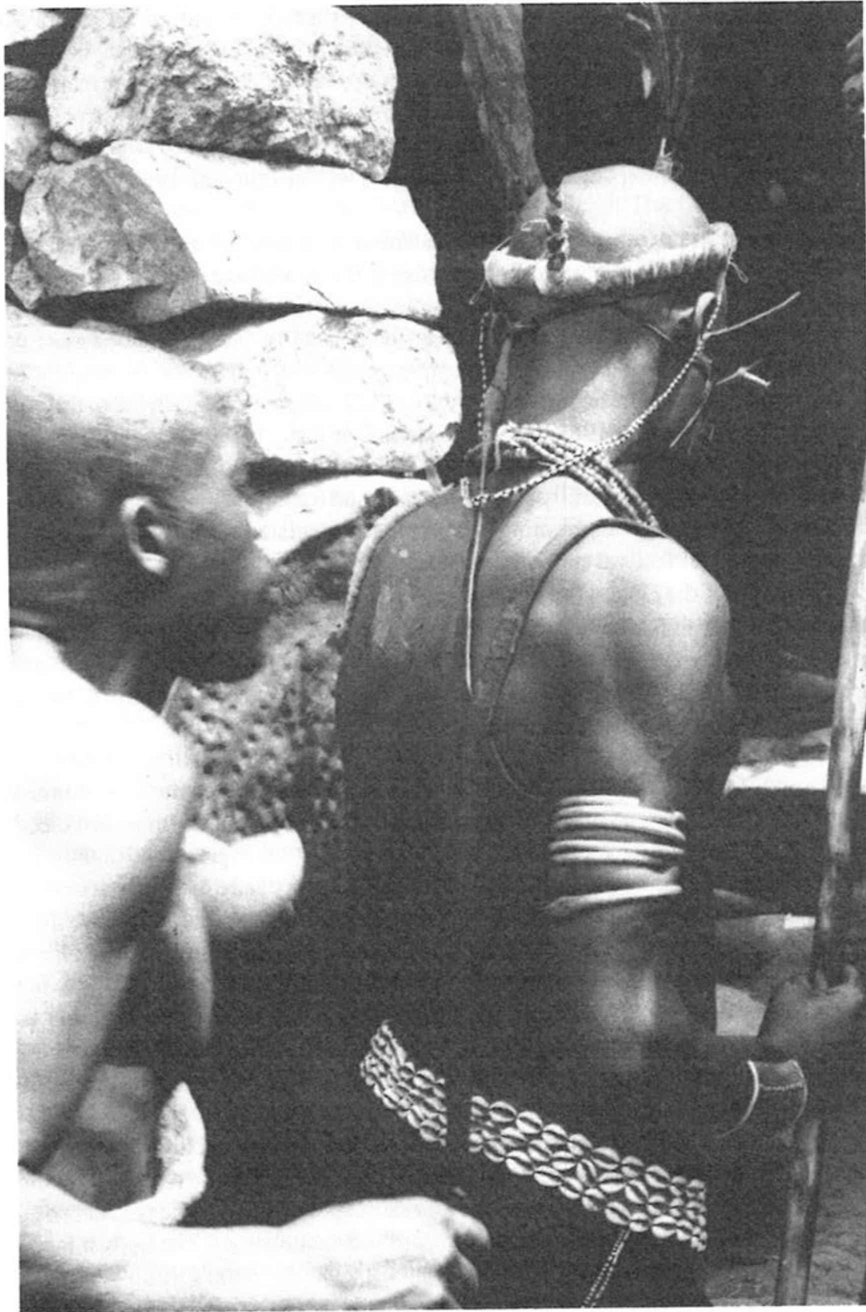

Plate 11–7. Teri, the mother's brother of the newly initiated Tizhe, spits some beer on his nephew's shoulder to bless him at the end of his seclusion period. As part of Kapsiki boys' initiation, Tizhe has not been out of his hut for eight days. As a new adult, he is vulnerable to evil influences, so he must be protected against them.

it is almost totally suppressed. The wicked people and the evil emanations are not mentioned, nor are any countermeasures against them indicated or ritually reinforced. It is as if evil does not exist, as if neither Dogon nor Kapsiki believes in anything evil. Evil is a kind of double negation, where a part of the supernatural world is denied presence as well as existence.

Contrasts of "Evil"

The societies of the Kapsiki and Dogon are comparable in ecological setting, social and territorial organization, and historical experiences; yet, they differ considerably in the way they cope with evil. In earlier sections, I reviewed evil and threatening influences, and in the preceding section, I sketched some commonalities of the major rituals in the shadow of which these involvements in and with evil take place; I also discussed systematic differences between the two cases. I will do the same now with the protective ritual and the notions of evil, moving from the contrasts between the two religions to the resemblances.

The threats the Kapsiki perceive stem from an ambiguous supernatural world that can have positive or negative import but is in the last instance dependable; people can in the long run rely on the gods, who behave in a more or less orderly fashion. Problems stemming from the supernatural world arise mainly in the form of illness (van Beek 1992a) or infertility and are couched in terms of guilt. A vague and general "badness", mainly nonobjectified and nonpersonalized, is brought about through specific individuals or personified illnesses. Evil, or "badness", is part of everyday village life and must be chased away periodically. Despite its vague nature it does have a precise location (even Death or Epidemic has its proper, well-known village; see van Beek 1978:293). If evil attacks, treatment is possible.

The same holds for evil of human origin: some specific people may be bad, but they are predictable and the problems they inflict can be treated by their equals. Witches are born with a deviant shadow (the manner of birth is important for the ritual status of the individual) and are fairly well known; they can deactivate their own inborn proclivities if they wish to, without harm to themselves. Witchcraft is limited to "normal people", that is, to those who are not differentiated by birth (like blacksmiths or twins), and is not thought to have any collective aspect. The types of witchcraft vary in range, badness, and importance, but all are relatively easy to ward off. Witches and sorcerers are clearly differentiated, and sorcerers have a protective as well as an aggressive aspect. Knowledge of objects, mainly not human-made, is crucial; spells are not very important. Blacksmiths form an important segment of society in this respect. Divination is specific, indicating precise sources of suffering and very precise ritual treatments, though some loopholes are preserved in the divinatory process; specific accusations about individual people are not voiced.

Guilt between individuals is an important source of problems too. Misdemeanor between kin, refusal to repay debts, or suspicion of black magic can lead to several ways of cursing; guilt leads to revenge, often with the explicit aim to kill the culprit. These deaths-by-guilt are contagious for co-residents and close agnates. Apart from

the evil of sorcery, the epitome of interhuman badness is theft, because it encroaches on the cherished twin values of property and privacy.

In contrast, the Dogon supernatural world is not dependable, but highly capricious. In the relationship between humans and gods, transgressions against the supernatural world are not important to explain misfortune; the taboos that exist are few and easy to comply with. The essence of evil is precisely identified (poison), but imprecisely localized, and illnesses are not personalized. This vague evil, which is predominantly of human origin, is not thrown out in rituals, but immobilized and suppressed, mainly by negating its existence and stressing the harmonious side of life. Evil is not a part of normal village life, but something of the night and the bush. Once evil is inflicted, treatment is virtually impossible; whatever efficient treatment is given is meted out by a specialist who is not associated with evil.

Ritual—and evil—power lies in the knowledge of words, backed up by objects that are usually human-made. Spells are the most important part of the procedure. Objects can be bought, and they derive their power from constant use. Once one is on the road to ritual use of objects, it is difficult and dangerous to turn back and to stop it, both for the regular altars and for the strictly private ones.

With witches, it is not the shadow but the whole personality that is important, and among the several types of witchcraft one is paramount. Characteristics of birth are relatively unimportant (the castes have no specific function in this). Neither is the proclivity of evil inherited at birth: inheritance occurs at death. The identity of poison people is unknown, and they may operate in groups. Divination is unspecific and general, never clear about causes or treatment. Accusations, specific or general, are never voiced.

Shame—not guilt—is the main focus of ritual, and revenge killings are not allowed and are practically unknown. Between humans one should bless, not curse, avoiding the degradation of the fellow Dogon. In relation to evil, these blessings aim not at harming or killing culprits, but at strengthening the social bond, in fact at immobilizing evil—it should be suppressed. Between equals, the epitome of evil—apart from poison—is lying and false accusation. Protection against this is difficult and can be done only by strong affirmation of the value of sociability and constant accessibility. Loss of face affects kith and kin too and easily involves the whole community.

Table 11.1, an overview of the complex differences in these societies shows important characteristics of Kapsiki and Dogon notions of evil and their context. The commonalities resulting from these differences (the right-hand column) are treated in the next section.

The Nature of Evil

The supernatural world for both the Kapsiki and the Dogon is not trustworthy in the short run, which may threaten the individual but in itself is not a source of evil. Water plays an interesting part in both instances: places with permanent water feature prominently as the danger spots, yet water is also crucial for life. Water seems to share the life-giving as well as the dangerous sides of the gods. Still, though the gods can be quite unreasonable, their inflictions can and must be

	Kapsiki	**Dogon**	**resemblance**
"supernatural world"	ambiguous, + or – but eventually dependable	capricious and not dependable	no immediate trustworthiness
supernatural threat	guilt punished by one's personal god [*shala*]	punishment for neglect of altar to Ama	inherent, but marginal; inflictions must be endured
theory of normal humans	one-dimensional	dependable	antithetic to supernatural world
origin of evil	special persons (deviant shadow)	unspecified persons (whole personality)	humans
known persons?	mostly, but the way they harm is vague	identity is vague, but means are known	limited specification
inheritance of evil	at birth	at death	inherited
relation with ego	close, lineage based	vague but close	close
specialization	protective and aggressive	protective	expensive
definition of evil action	theft (encroaches on property and privacy)	false accusation (causes loss of face)	antithesis of communal value
evil essence	object	poison	artifact
locomotion	evil flies	evil crawls	self-propelled
contagion	epidemic	taints person	contagious, lasting
diagnosis/ divination	specific sources and treatments	unclear on causes or treatments	specific humans not named
treatment?	yes; + protection and revenge	no; protection and oaths; not revenge	protection is important
prevention	careful behavior	careful speech	circumspection

Table 11.1. A comparison of Kapsiki and Dogon notions of Evil

endured. If the gods are reasonable, the problems they send are one's own fault. In both societies, the supernatural world should be kept at a distance and not mingled too closely with human affairs. In neither Kapsiki nor Dogon are ancestors of prime importance in the religion. This in fact offers the possibility of keeping the other world at arm's length.

Evil originates mainly from fellow humans, and it carries a limited identification. If evil humans can be pointed out, the way they harm is vague; or if a specific poison is the main instrument, then the identity of the culprits is vague. There is a dialectic relationship with evil: it should be known somewhat, but without an overly close association. If the bad individuals are vague, illnesses will probably not be personified. In ritual, evil is partly—but never completely—overcome or suppressed; it stays just inside or beyond the perimeter of the village. The individualized Kapsiki culture associates evil more easily with particular beings, makes a sharper distinction between involuntary and self-willed evil, and tolerates the background presence of evil more easily than the Dogon culture, which is more oriented toward communal harmony. For Dogon, evil has to be defined outside the boundary of human existence and is always somewhat voluntary. An impersonal evil renders treatment very difficult and does not specify a section of the human being most vulnerable to the absorption of evil. Manifest differences between people, like manner of birth, then, are not used to implicate the persons in question.

In either case, once evil is started, it is hard to stop. It proceeds at its own force and impetus, whether it is guilt-triggered or stems from the object. The objects used in the protective rituals become tainted with the enemy. In both cases, Kapsiki as well as Dogon, human-made artifacts are professed to be used, and eventually they all must be discarded, lest they grow too strong. This may take one or several generations, but eventually one has to get rid of protective magic.

The definition of what is the most evident evil in society is consonant with the (inverted) main values of each society. In fact, the concept of what constitutes the main internal threat to society is much more clear than the positive values themselves. The Kapsiki abhorrence of theft and the morbid fascination of the Dogon with false accusations and lies are manifest in many ways. Consequently, one can more easily characterize these cultures by their chosen evils than by their definitions of good. One reason for this may be that much evil is considered to be of human origin, coming from the people very close at hand. Afflictions coming from abroad, be they from outside enemies or from environmental risks, are not evil; they are just there. No one argues with the climate. Instead, a quiet and dignified suffering is called for (similar to when evil for which there is no protection comes from the gods)—a kind of suffering that is most clear in the Kapsiki culture, where showing affliction does not elicit help. But when evil comes from nearby, the culture in question offers a frame for selecting what aspect of possible interaction is defined as evil. The societies concur that killing within the group is always evil. The life of the individual is considered vulnerable, and a sharp focus on health is discernible in both cultures. The other aspects in which a human being is deemed vulnerable vary much more. The privacy and autonomy of the Kapsiki is vulnerable

to theft, just as the integration into society of the Dogon is vulnerable to loss of face and credibility.

A second reason that cultures may be characterized by their chosen evils is more dialectic. The notions of evil for the Kapsiki and the Dogon carry some independence. Evil is defined as a substance and as an artifact; "the absence of good" would never do as a definition of evil. The notion of good is more dependent on the notion of evil than vice versa. A good person usually is defined as someone who follows the rules of his society. Following the rules implies for a Dogon different things than it does for a Kapsiki, as the positive values vary. But in both cases following the rules primarily means not trespassing them, abstaining from faults and mistakes—in short, the absence of evil. Of course, positive values can be defined—sociability or autonomy—and strived for in an active, positive way. Still, being sociable means never refusing someone, and autonomy or relying on oneself means not leaning on another person. The proof of good is abstention from evil. There may be a sound reason for the inequality of good and evil. Evil is within reach. Good is not. Both cultures harbor an ideal for human beings that cannot be reached. The "white belly and liver" of the Dogon is a good example: everyone should be open toward the other as well as ready for inspection at any time—a goal very imperfectly realized in everyday life. The vaunted autonomy of the Kapsiki is both a psychic and an economic impossibility also. So, good as such is definitely out of reach in practice and is best defined as the relative absence of evil.

Private Ritual: The Innocent Apprentice

The private rituals that protect against evil (or generate it) are markedly different from the communal ones discussed earlier. These rituals do not rally scores of people, nor do they occupy a special place on the ritual calendar. Performed alone, with a minimum of publicity, sometimes even furtively, they seek to protect against evil influences, aiming at isolating the person in question from the dealings of his fellow humans, instead of participating in group identity. Here the individual shields himself or herself against certain elements or aspects of the society at large, putting individual interests before those of the group. In these rituals the individual is on the defensive: he or she inevitably faces a whole society of people with conflicting ambitions and unknown but large reservoirs of knowledge and power. It is, in a sense, the down-to-earth part of religion that fits in with the lowest echelons in social organization, the (nuclear or extended) family and the individual. After the dialectic euphoria of the great community rituals, this is the complementary, sobering alienation inherent in daily existence. "The religion of Monday" I have called it elsewhere (van Beek 1975:60), but maybe the term "rites of Monday" is more apt. After all, both aspects are part of one religion.

In these "rites of Monday" the focus, as mentioned above, is on the individual. What picture of the individual emerges from these rites? In the Kapsiki case, the individual is a self-evident social entity, connected with the immediate family (most often the nuclear one) but in fact alone. This aloneness is clear in divination in which the individual faces the whole village and any other group relevant to the problem in question as opposites, not as fellows. Fundamentally, a Kapsiki has to rely on

himself or herself, on his or her own resources and characteristics. Most of these cannot be changed; one has to live with oneself. Thus, the general social situation of a man or women is accepted as given, and only minute details can be changed. In ritual and divination those problems are addressed that may stand between an individual and his or her potential existences. The sterility of a woman, illness, or an overdose of bad luck are problems that can be actively addressed and are situations one can change. The same holds true for any supernatural or other aggression directed against the individual; active protection is called for. But on the whole the individual is accepted as he or she appears to be; a rich man will always be rich, a poor man poor: his personal god [*shala*] has made him so. A dangerous man or woman, a known witch or harmful sorcerer, will be expelled from the village, since in no way can one change such a fundamental trait of personality. If it is their character, they will remain so. That implies that in daily life Kapsiki make a clear distinction between those wrongs, mishaps, or transgressions that are one's fault and those that are not (one's *shala* did it). In the first case, it may be possible to redress the wrong, such as in those cases in which the individual is himself responsible for being *ndegema*. This term implies the vertical relationship between the individual and the supernatural world: if a taboo has been broken, or if sacrifices have been neglected, then one is out of harmony with *shala*. The relationship between ego and *shala* is quite independent from the one between the individual and the rest of the village. If the individual is not responsible, then a quiet acceptance [*kanewe le ntsu*, literally "to look with the eyes", meaning a quiet resignation of suffering] behooves a truly mature person.

The Dogon have a more active theory of personality. In their view the individual is not a self-evident social unit but exists mainly in relation to kinsmen and peers—in social context. This shows in divination, where the individual is symbolized as surrounded with his or her equals vis-à-vis the opposite entities, the supernatural world—god, the grave, and the relevant problem. In general, their relationship with the community at large is less problematic than for the Kapsiki, so their defenses against their fellow human beings are less specific than in our first example. What they want to protect themselves against is being talked about, the "words", which implies a falling-out with the community and being out of harmony with other people. So the Dogon "rites of Monday" convey the impression of the individual as a part of a larger whole, in one of its many social echelons.

Given the existing and reinforcing social context of the individual, a Dogon feels sure that he or she can change some aspects of his or her personality. The environment is considered "manageable" (van Beek 1992b) and personal riches a result of conscious and deliberate efforts. Of course, a lot of things are beyond control, like fertility, illness, and death. But since these are completely beyond control, they are left to Ama [God] (van Beek 1988b). The Dogon term for personal mistake, *liri*, reflects this emphasis. The term refers to the relation between humans, not between a person and Ama. Redress of wrongs must be sought in interpersonal relationships, by asking forgiveness and by trying to forget the existence of friction. People who are bad have chosen to be so; they are not born that way. So they must be changed, mainly through public exposure and loss of face.

Despite these obvious differences, some resemblances between the two societies' "rites of Monday" can be discerned. The individual is portrayed as a vulnerable being who is an obvious prey for the (supernatural) predators at large in the more or less direct environment. Still, that same individual has his or her defenses and can rely on outsiders; many of these private rituals do involve asking for professional assistance, an aspect notably absent in the great community rituals. In our examples, a diviner/blacksmith (Kapsiki) and a general ritual specialist (Dogon) are consulted. Individual rites also often call for divination, a professional service only a few qualified people can offer (Plate 11–8). The rites performed may be simple, but often are not, and in any case their application calls for specialized and secret knowledge. Even if the rites are simple, it may be much safer to have a specialist perform them.

Thus, the moves to establish oneself as an individual and the processes involved in maintaining the boundary between ego and community reinforce the social ties of the individual, making him or her more dependent on others. These social relationships are not to the same persons the individual seeks protection for or against (kith and kin or outsiders); on the other hand, the specialists are the same that may help threaten the individual supernaturally. A specialist in protection is also a specialist in aggression. To guard oneself, one must deliver part of the independence to those people who may be most dangerous to one's very existence.

In the protective ritual the individual works in a state of partial knowledge, both in the diagnosis of the problem and in its treatment. Divination does not offer a clear answer to one's questions—at least not as clear as many clients wish (van Beek

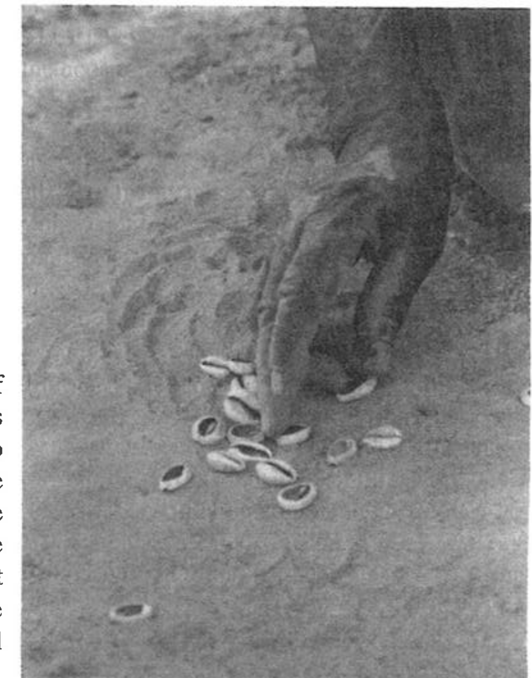

Plate 11–8. Adiyè, a Dogon of the village of Amani, consults the cowrie shells in order to know what dangers the future holds for him. He is one of the few who "really knows the words" [*anga tĩ*] both to protect from and to inflict evil. Cowrie shell divination is widespread in West Africa.

1978:367). Reasons for this reticence, to be specific, are obvious from the point of view of the diviner/specialist, but the system of divination itself may preclude precise answers. Compared with the Kapsiki, whose divinatory system allows for straightforward answers (van Beek 1982a), the Dogon system (Pern, Alexander, and van Beek 1982; Paulme 1948) is intended to furnish only general answers to broad questions: Will there be "peace" in the near future? How will the next cultivation season turn out?

Among both Kapsiki and Dogon, people rely on more than one divinatory system at the same time, partly to overcome the limitations of one system and partly because they may lack trust in the personality and the craftsmanship of the diviner. In any treatment too, this ambivalence shows. In the Kapsiki example, a problem arises from the partial knowledge of a series of coherent magical applications: starting one magical means (how to marry a wife) implies changing the "natural" course of events. A wife who is magically induced to stay may remain barren. The *rhwè* to restore fertility may result in the death of the firstborn. The medicine against this threat may stunt the growth of the child or prevent the youngster from ever marrying. When dabbling in the realm of magic, one has to be very knowledgeable to avoid serious mishaps.

Serious mishaps can also happen with the power emanating from the ritual paraphernalia themselves. If the Dogon has been sacrificing on a certain altar for a long time, it will become dangerous to stop the sacrifices. The altar demands its sacrifices, or else.... In the Kapsiki example, *sekwa*, while in itself without any social stigma, has the same qualities: it may attack people, especially vulnerable people like children and pregnant women, the very people it is deemed to protect or help. Magical means, the paraphernalia of the "rites of Monday", are inherently obstinate in character. The individual never really masters the unruliness of the supernatural world, nor can he or she be sure that the chosen specialist can master it. The individual, in fact, is a little helpless against the vast reservoir of unseen enemies and specialists that are potentially against him or her. The individual, and even the specialist, is in an apprentice role, sometimes literally "*l'apprenti sorcier*". There is no security in these rites, no guarantee of effectiveness.

The general attitude seems to contradict this "working in the dark"; when performing magical ritual, people exude a great confidence. The very instant the rite is performed or the medicine taken, the problem is said to be solved. There is no discernible doubt about its efficacy if people feel sure the medicine taken is the right one. Still, there is a lurking suspicion about its effect, for people are not surprised when the "right stuff" does not work. This contradiction is worth investigating. In the Kapsiki example, Teri keeps a number of options open; he does have faith in his diviner but still considers other possibilities and checks other "authorities". Nevertheless, each separate ritual act will be executed with a clear show of confidence. A scene from the Kapsiki may illustrate this.

> Zera Mpa has a magical protection against "war" that he wants to show to his friend. It is a complicated object, consisting of several goat horns and a cow's horn full of unknown but potent things: herbs, roots, and objects like owl balls, claws of various beasts, toucan beaks and the like. His father long ago "found" it in the bush, meaning that he once spotted an enemy who wore it; after a long vigil Zera's father stole it when the other took a bath. It is a potent *rhwè* that offers a secure protection against the intrusion of iron: no iron object can ever pierce your flesh when you wear it. But it might have lost its strength, so Zera tests it. He takes a huge melon, puts the *rhwè* around it and thrusts a knife into it, burying it to the hilt, the juice splashing him in the face. Zera, his face glowing with confidence, tells his friend: "You see, it does not work any longer. But if it would have had its *berete* [force], the blade would have broken off immediately; not even the tip would have entered the melon". (personal communication:Mogodé, 23 August 1973)

This confidence in part is trust in the specialist, or in the case of Zera, in the powers of the people of the past. And the unshaken belief people show after *disconfirmation* is even more astonishing than the confidence people exude after performance of any magical rite. Failure of magic strengthens belief in it. The reason for the failure always lies within the sphere of magic itself: the powers have leaked away, elsewhere people have even stronger powers, or rites have not been performed properly. Magical ritual is a closed system in which the observable has no bearing on the belief in efficacy. Of course, the tenacious belief often is a strong factor in helping make a ritual procedure efficacious, as has been demonstrated and argued convincingly (Tennekes 1982).

A final picture emerging from the private rituals of our two cases is one of feigned innocence. All people seeking protection against evil seem to approach the field not only as apprentices but also as people for whom working with evil is an alien occupation. When they come to the specialists to search for supernatural

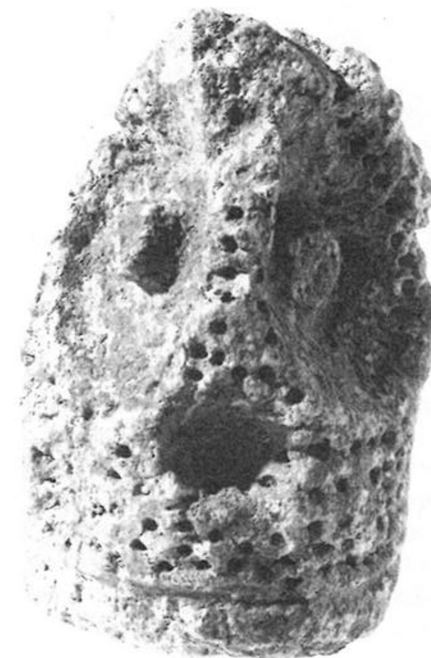

Plate 11–9. In some Dogon villages, terracotta figurines [*toũ*] are fabricated that represent illnesses and deformations. Though the people making them claim that they help in healing, many other Dogon are convinced that they are harmful and represent evil. (H. 18 cm.; terracotta. Collection: Herman Haan.)

protection, they tend to suggest that they do so for the first time (this is one reason the Kapsiki tend to switch specialists after consultation), that they do not know the character of evil. They pretend to be unaware of the enemy, having gathered only recently some vague rumors about its threat. The language used is vague and full of evasions. One central reason for this approach is to disclaim any knowledge of harmful magic and—even more emphatically—to deny that one would ever use it against a fellow being. The clients appear to be free of all evil, full of benevolent innocence, and reticent to learn anything specific about this dark side of the world.

Thus, in these "rites of Monday" another pious lie is performed: the adults act as if they are children. With just a glimmer of knowledge, they act as if they believe unquestioningly, fully accepting the authority of their specialist, while they themselves are innocent of all evil. As the group in the great communal rituals disclaimed even the existence of evil, the individual having these magical rites performed disclaims any identification with evil, even when dabbling in it. In both instances, Dogon and Kapsiki, the execution of these magical rites runs counter to some central values in society. Kapsiki society is pervaded by a strong sense of privacy and respect for the autonomy of the other (van Beek 1982a); for them *rhwè* is essentially an intolerable intrusion into the private lives of other people. For the Dogon, with their highly valued harmony, the very notion of malevolent people is an affront, which can be tolerated if these people are far removed and anonymous. The negation of individual association with evil helps to reproduce a society in which evil "knows its place" and is kept in check, reinforcing the priority of social values over individual interests, helping to reproduce an evil-free society of fully socialized adults.

Symbols of Evil

So far, our analysis has proceeded along more or less structural lines, aiming at the systematic oppositions on the basis of a joint frame of reference. The content of the belief about evil, the collective suppositions accompanying the systematic choices highlighted above, is also worth examining.

The images evoked by Kapsiki and Dogon show a similar systematic contrast. Evil in Kapsiki culture is stable and unchangeable. It is associated with carrion and dung, and the Kapsiki suppositions about evil show a definite anal side: the witch's shadow leaves and reenters the body through the anus, while in stories Death is mastered by poking a hot iron into his anus. The spirit when descending from on high waits on the dung heap of the house for a suitable time to enter a woman's womb. So a certain association can be found between the aggressive spirit and human excrement. The mouth is the antithesis of the anus for the Kapsiki: from the mouth blessings emanate, either by talking or by spitting (see Plate 11–7, p. 214). Evil resides in the heart or the shadow, good in the mouth and the head.

Protection focuses either on the wall of the house or on the skin of the body; the two are homologous for Kapsiki (van Beek 1986): what the skin is to the body, the wall is to the house. Danger should not enter past the compound wall at all lest it attack the family and should not enter the skin either, the last protective barrier.

The blade of the enemy's knife breaks at the skin, just as the thief will drop dead when climbing over the wall. Even when the flies imbued with black magic have penetrated the house, they cannot find an opening into the protected body. Children are protected with medical anointments and medicine, rendering their skin tough, leathery, and less susceptible to evil. Both mouth and anus have to be guarded against intrusions, too, but the skin as such is especially vulnerable for attack. Protection aims at killing the bringer of evil in his tracks.

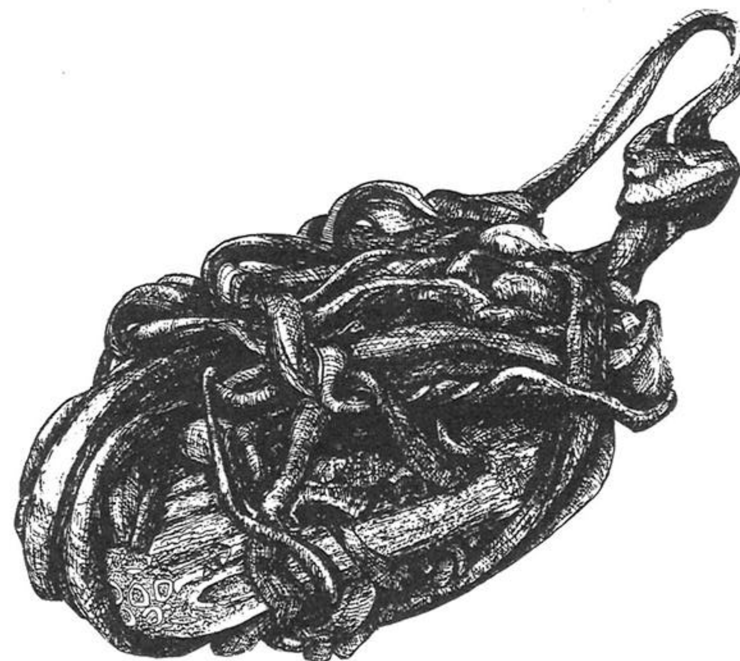

Plate 11–10. The hoof of a wild boar, wrapped in a leather string, is used by Kapsiki as a protection in war. If used with the proper words, it will keep the bearer from being wounded by any iron object such as arrows, spears, or throwing knives.

Evil flies through the air: it floats, not really flying like a bird but hovering like an insect, with a smooth and unpredictable movement like that of a cat. If associated with a color, it is red. It is not so much created (cf. Macfarlane 1985:90) as omnipresent. It can be anywhere, and it can absent itself for a time; thus, chasing it is a way of coping with it.

In Kapsiki society, evil does not manifest itself as an organized group of people or counterculture (Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 1988b). The bad people do not represent a counter society nor do they follow an alternative set of norms that negates the mainstream value system. Although those people who are different, slightly abnormal, or subnormal—special births, twins, blacksmiths, etc.—are

dangerous, they do not form a group on their own as such. The personified dangers (Death and some epidemics) share that aspect. They are in some ways subhuman (half a body, one leg and one arm, etc.) and in some ways quite human. They can be tricked and led astray, even if only for a short time. These abnormal people, however, do form an integral part of society, like the foreign wives who cannot be trusted, but are indispensable.

The Dogon notion of evil is more capricious and changeable. Though some scatological aspects are discernible (the witch urinating on her victim), the Dogon focus is more oral: the main gate of evil is the mouth. The evil is produced by the mouth (triggered by the condition of the liver) and enters it too. Purification is done in the mouth, either in the absolute form of an emetic or by chewing some special roots and barks. In this case, both blessing and evil stem from the mouth. Protection and attempts at treatment are delivered in the mouth; medicine has to be chewed, often without ingesting it. Protection has to be given in the vicinity of the body, before evil actually touches or enters, and the protection does not aim at killing but at immobilizing evil. "Poison people" cannot enter or are attacked by an irresistible itch; witches remain outdoors, scratching.

Evil creeps, crawling around the perimeters of the living space, either in the form of objects or in the form of people, and may jump on others when they are close by. In the form of words, evil is omnipresent and can be generated at any time from the liver, but in its artifact shape it encircles the village and then suddenly attacks. Its color, if any, is black. Red is associated with capriciousness, such as with the gods—not with evil.

There is somewhat of an organized-group side to Dogon evil; a sense of a countergroup, a secret society of "poison people", keeping the normal society under a limited siege. The norms and values in that counter society are inverted: women are more dangerous (stronger) than men, and normal society's main values (harmony and accessibility) are transformed into random killing and secrecy. The strong sense of identity from group membership in normal life is negated by a total anonymity, a nonidentity of bad people.

Consequently, evil does not stem from abnormal or subnormal people, but from very normal ones, who cannot be discerned as being evil but who secretly gather together to do it. The harmful spirits are the ones that most closely resemble the Dogon themselves, while the tree spirits, or the spirits with a half body, have been helpful in the past.

The symbols used for evil and the collective representations shaping these symbols show the systematic contrast between the two cultures discussed earlier. Evil in both cases is localized within the human body (cf. Douglas 1966, 1973), and in a specific part of it. The Kapsiki body symbols—anus, heart, and skin—and the Dogon ones—mouth and liver—in themselves are not symbols of evil alone, but of beneficial action as well. Also, the mouth, heart, and liver are the central seats of emotion in the respective cultures. In the Dogon case, blessing and evil stem from the same source, while among the Kapsiki, defensive symbols are different from offensive ones. This is consonant with the anonymity versus the specificity of the definition of evil in both cultures; in these respects the symbolism of evil is

simply a part of the general symbolic system. The Kapsiki do not have notions of a community of sorcerers; this fits in with their general tendency toward individualism, like the social interaction among "poison people" fits in with the community-oriented Dogon.

In some other ways, however, the body symbolism presents the diametrically opposite focus compared to daily behavior: the Dogon, who are very tactile in daily interaction, easily and frequently touching each others' bodies, have a magical defense that does not center on the skin, while the much less tactile Kapsiki do concentrate protection on the individual's skin. The evil coming from outside the Dogon community is not brought about by abnormal persons, but by unidentifiable normal people, while in the Kapsiki case the supernatural danger comes from abnormal people who are fairly well known. In the great rituals as well as in daily life the reverse holds: danger comes for the Kapsiki from the normal strangers outside the community, and for the Dogon from the "abnormal" ones who are well known. So the notion of evil, while firmly entrenched in the whole of the culture's symbolic universe, is an important part of a transformation of norms and values of the "normal" society. This systematic difference is shown in Table 11.2.

In both cases evil has a sufficient degree of vagueness. One who becomes too involved in it can be caught in its web and perish. So the individual, who has his social identity and the models of his culture imprinted and reinforced in daily life and in the great rituals, has to chart a cautious course between good and bad, between the unattainable ideal of good and the prison of evil (cf. Ricoeur 1969). However, the very vagueness of these concepts associated with evil enables one to cope with it. Evil fits in with the rest of religion, and its definition allows for a substantive middle ground between extremes. The definitions of both good and evil imply that in any phase and aspect of life, one must always live with both of them; coping with evil implies coping with good too (Willis 1985). The show of innocence, mentioned above, is a viable solution. The model of the child in the

	proceeds from	**resides in**	**characteristics**
Kapsiki "evil"	anus	heart	flies, floats, darts; red; not created; individual subhuman
Kapsiki "good"	mouth/head	skin	protection can also kill
Dogon "evil"	mouth	liver	creeps; black; created; humans in group
Dogon "good"	mouth	liver and intestines	protection immobilizes

Table 11.2. Contrasts of Evil and Good among the Kapsiki and the Dogon.

face of good and evil keeps the options open both to make mistakes and to use the power of evil to avoid their consequences. The possibility of this charade may be essential for living in any culture. If the space between good and evil is reduced, one tends towards a puritan system (Thoden van Velzen and van Beek 1988), in which the slightest slip from the ideal is considered a grave sin and where innocence is no longer possible. Kapsiki and Dogon cultures allow ample room for individual maneuvering between the two poles of good and evil, and each in its own way manages to shape not an easy way of life but a life that is feasible.

Notes

1. Research among the Kapsiki of northern Cameroon and the Higi of Nigeria; carried out in 1971, 1972–73, 1979, 1984, and 1988; was made possible by grants from the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Studies (WOTRO) and the University of Utrecht.

2. Orthography of Kapsiki and Dogon words

h .... voiceless velar fricative f
c .... voiceless alveo-palatal affricate .... Church
j .... voiced alveo-palatal affricate .... John
y .... voiced alveo-palatal halfvocal .... Young
dl .... voiced alveolateral fricative
rh .... voiced velar fricative
ĩ .... nasalized i
ũ .... nasalized u
ò .... god
e .... the
è .... that

No tones are indicated.

3. Research among the Dogon of Mali; carried out in 1978, 1979–80, 1981 and followed up by repeated fieldstays in 1982, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1989, 1990, and 1992 financed by the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO), the University of Utrecht, Time-Life, and Agence Aigle.

4. On the Dogon a considerable body of ethnographic literature has been produced by the French ethnographer Marcel Griaule and his collaborators (Griaule 1938, 1948; Dieterlen 1941, 1982; Griaule and Dieterlen 1965; Calame-Griaule 1965). The data as presented here do not stem from this literature for two reasons: first, almost no reference to any religious expression that could be dubbed "witchcraft" or "sorcery", let alone "evil", has been made by the Griaule school. Second, a large part of that literature has come under severe ethnographical criticism by the present author (van Beek 1991a).

12

Myth & Epic in Central Africa

Luc de Heusch

From the Atlantic coast to the mountainous areas of the African Great Lakes, marvelous fictional narrations have been passed on from generation to generation.[1] My intent is to analyze how these epics are related to the processes that have taken shape in the accounts of the deeds of the heroes who founded states among the Luba in Zaïre or among the peoples of Rwanda. In two books devoted to Bantu myths and rituals, I have tried to show that these tales—although they do have historical pretensions since their function is to lay the foundations for sacred kingship and to legitimate this key institution in the social and cosmic order—nonetheless have to be treated throughout as myths (de Heusch 1972, 1982). Under this assumption and in the light of this previous research, I would now like to examine the series of epics about Lianja, the legendary hero of the Zaïrean Nkundo, who form an acephalous society organized in lineages without any kind of sacred chieftaincy.

Like many of the Central African epic heroes, Lianja had a very unusual, indeed fabulous, birth: he sprang, fully armed and accompanied by a twin sister, from the lower leg of his mother, whose pregnancy had been overlong. Having pointed out this essential characteristic, Pierre Smith (1979) has qualified these exceptional heroes who spring out of the same imaginary pattern as "overconceived" [*surconçus*].

Specialists in full costume sing the epic of Lianja around a fire; their faces and bodies are painted with asymmetrical drawings; they wear feather headdresses and hold spears. The performance lasts several successive nights. This prose epic has several variants. I refer to the version collected by Edmond Boelaert (1949). For the sake of clarity, I have divided it into several sequences.

1. All the wives of the ancestor Wai were pregnant and gave birth except for one, whose pregnancy drew out so long that everyone made fun of her. In secret, an old woman took an egg out of this wife's womb; and the next day, a handsome boy hatched from it. Bokele, this son, managed to be accepted by his father Wai. To bring the sun nearer to the village, which had always been plunged in darkness,