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SPECIAL SECTION: REVISITING THE AZANDE

Witchcraft, disputes, and trials among the Azande (2014–2016)

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Mangu, what Evans-Pritchard translated into English as “witchcraft” and around which he built his landmark ethnography, has disappeared among the South Sudanese Azande. But other kinds of witchcraft and magic (*ngua*) arise continuously. Drawing on anthropological research in South Sudan’s local courts and on interviews with disputants, chiefs, and judges, this article dives into the opaque, elusive, and mercurial world of witchcraft and magic. Whereas *mangu* was used solely to do harm, today’s *ngua* can be categorized along a spectrum from benign self-protection to malevolent pillaging and attacking *ngua*. When witchcraft cases are brought to local customary courts, there is room for nuance, precision, and for attention to the less arcane friction which often preceded witchcraft. But when customary courts punish alleged perpetrators, clashes abound with statutory judges and United Nations officials who see witchcraft as a dangerous falsehood and the imprisoned alleged perpetrators as victims of human rights abuses.

Keywords: witchcraft, magic, Azande, Evans-Pritchard, customary law, legal pluralism

In the precolonial world of the Azande described by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, there were no judge-led courts of law. In his account, explanations for many misfortunes were sought in witchcraft and magic, investigation was done by oracular divination, and adjudication was made by kings or their decentralized representatives. But much has changed since the fieldwork of Evans-Pritchard (1926–1930) and the precolonial time about which he wrote (prior to 1905). South Sudan and the Azande have gone through colonial rule (1905–1955), Sudanese (1956) and then South Sudanese (2011) independence, and several cycles of large-scale civil war, displacement, and return.

This article is based on my doctoral research in Azande-majority Western Equatoria State, South Sudan, in 2014–2015. That main body of research is complemented with interviews with South Sudanese Azande in Uganda (2017–2019) and the Netherlands (2023). As an anthropology graduate, I had read Evans-Pritchard’s *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande* (1937; see also 1976) and I was excited to meet Zande people. Yet witchcraft was not my research focus. I was part of a larger research project, which compared Afghanistan and South Sudan as “fragile and conflict-affected states” to learn

the extent to which people had access to customary or statutory justice (Jacobs and Otto 2016). In Western Equatoria, colleagues indicated that land and family disputes were prominent local concerns. With a team of research assistants, I attended hearings in local customary and statutory courts, analyzed court records, and interviewed disputants, traditional authorities, judges, prosecutors, and police. We soon learned that in a wide variety of social and societal problems, people suspected witchcraft and magic to be at play. In a similar way, when I researched how Zande refugees in Uganda were coping with war and displacement in 2017–2019, I heard rumors and allegations of witchcraft—where harming people was either the sole objective or the price paid for personal gain. There were often new developments, new scares: dial 0 twelve times and you reach the people under the river; go to this Facebook page for a man who can send bees to your enemy. Witchcraft appeared always there, just out of sight.

While witchcraft was something everyone spoke about in the register of rumor, it proved difficult to research. There were difficulties of translation (see below) and issues of access. Few people wanted to speak authoritatively



about the occult, and those who did were reluctant to be seen doing so, worrying that others might find it suspicious that they apparently knew about the workings of witchcraft. Back in Evans-Pritchard's days, witchdoctors operated in plain sight: so much so that he photographed the initiation of his research assistant into a witchdoctor "corporation" (Morton 2020). But in my three months in Yambio, I never saw a witchdoctor and my attempt to interview a reputable young *borongua* (medicine man) was rejected "by the spirits." As a young white man staying at the Catholic church's curia, people likely presumed that I would judge witchcraft negatively. So, I have seen very little witchcraft with my own eyes and rely in this article on court observations and interviews with disputants, chiefs, judges, and key interlocutors who taught me what they had learned about the elusive, opaque, and complex world of witchcraft.

Based on that material, this article will offer four main insights. First, forms of witchcraft, oracles, and magic have drastically changed since the days of Evans-Pritchard. Most notably, *mangu*—the cornerstone of Evans-Pritchard's ethnography and for which he uses the English term "witchcraft"—has disappeared completely. And yet many other kinds of witchcraft or magic arise continuously. Second, whereas *mangu* was used solely to do harm, today's *ngua* ("medicines," now also often translated as "witchcraft") are more ambivalent and can be categorized along a spectrum from benign protective *ngua*, to self-defense *ngua*, and more malicious pillaging and attacking *ngua*. Third, often the person who brings a case to the customary court is not the alleged victim, but the alleged "sender" of the harmful *ngua*. This alleged sender often fears a violent revenge if the allegation is not authoritatively refuted and comes to court hoping to prove their innocence. Fourth, in such cases the customary courts are the most receptive forum despite their jurisdictional limitations, enforcement troubles, and the friction with higher statutory courts and United Nations officials.

This article continues with four sections. First, it traces some of the major changes in Zandeland since Evans-Pritchard's time. Second, it explores how witchcraft, oracles, and magic remain significant, even if some forms have disappeared and many new ones emerged. Third, the article presents several witchcraft cases and their investigation and adjudication before local customary courts. Fourth, it shows the problematic responses to witchcraft offered by judges, Catholic charismatics, and United Nations officials.

"The Azande" since Evans-Pritchard: A dizzying and troubled history

Most Azande live in the peripheries of present-day Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan. In South Sudan, most Azande live in Western Equatoria State, where they form a local majority. In precolonial times and especially in the turbulent nineteenth century, the Azande had powerful kings and highly centralized economies (Lloyd 1978). This ended abruptly when, around 1900, three colonial powers—Belgium, France, and the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium—conquered the area and carved it up, establishing national borders and divergent colonial administrations.¹ For many South Sudanese Azande, the death of King Gbudue on February 9, 1905, serves as a watershed moment, marking the end of sovereignty and the beginning of colonial occupation (see Hillary, this issue).

The best anthropological works on Sudanese Zande life prior to colonial rule (1905–1956) were written by Evans-Pritchard. From 1926, he conducted twenty months of fieldwork near Yambio, sponsored by the colonial government.² He spoke the Zande language and endeavored to live as much like the people he researched as was possible for a white British man. Evans-Pritchard's works have been criticized, among other reasons, for focusing excessively on order and overlooking change and confusion (Braak 2022; Geschiere, this issue; Hutchinson 1996; Leonardi 2013; Shipton 2009). Still, *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande* continues to be required reading for many anthropology students across the world today.

While Evans-Pritchard's authoritative ethnographic picture of "the Azande" has remained unchanged, the Zande people and their beliefs and practices have since lived through a long century of dizzying change. At the time of Evans-Pritchard's fieldwork, the Anglo-Egyptian colonial administration moved from its initial policy of military control and shoestring neglect to one of transformative and coercive ambition. The administration tried to combat sleeping sickness—and increase state

1. "The most significant border-drawing exercise took place at the Berlin Conference in 1884–5. But the borders especially between Sudan, 'Congo Free State' and Uganda kept shifting until the death of King Leopold II and the end of the Lado Enclave in 1910" (Braak 2022: 48).

2. In the area of Prince Gangura, son of King Gbudue.



control—by forcibly resettling people away from streams and forests and to the roads and into “model villages” (Larken 1926; Leonardi 2013; Palmer and Kingsley 2016; Philipps 1925). It was in these newly created villages that Evans-Pritchard carried out his research.

In the 1940s, the colonial administration launched the “Zande Scheme,” an extraordinarily ambitious cotton-growing plan aimed to boost economic growth and industrialization. This involved the forcible resettlement of some two hundred thousand Western Equatorians into small rural villages along geometrical grids (Ferguson 1954; Reining 1966, 1982). Colonial officials hoped that returning people to the countryside in this way would also counteract the “detrribalization” they associated with urbanization. The Scheme was profoundly disruptive. Reining’s account is revealing:

Confusion, irregularity of day-to-day behavior, and lack of organization characterized the modern Zande scene at the time of my study [1952–1955]. Because of the transitory nature of the Zande way of life, no one was sure about his social role. No Zande, whether chief or commoner, felt that he had control over the behavior of those who influenced him politically, and no one could predict what would happen next. (Reining 1966: 12)

A loss of control would prove a recurring theme for many South Sudanese Azande for decades to come. Sudanese independence in 1956 meant that now Khartoum, not London, controlled the government. The ensuing decades were scarred by civil wars: the First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972, also known as “Anyanya 1”), the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005, also known as “the war of Garang” or “the SPLA war”), and—in this part of South Sudan—the Lord’s Resistance Army incursions (2005–2013). Millions of people were killed or displaced in these wars. Many members of the Zande community moved away: some across the nearby borders to the Zande-majority areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic (Hillary 2021), others to Egypt, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda, and off the continent to Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Hope peaked around 2011, when South Sudan gained its independence after a historic referendum. Millions of South Sudanese returned from exile to their country of “milk and honey,” hoping to build a new future of peace and prosperity, unity, and sovereignty. Most of my field

research took place in 2014–2015. Even though the South Sudanese Civil War had erupted in December 2013 in other parts of South Sudan, Yambio experienced relative peace. Schools, markets, hospitals, government buildings, and courts were open, and people went about their daily lives. In the geographical and temporal proximity of war, life goes on. Conflict-related migration and return meant that many of Yambio’s inhabitants had lived elsewhere, and the towns were increasingly cosmopolitan. Exile and return had also brought new ideas, networks, and resources which in turn influenced the post-conflict moment.

This peaceful time came to an end in 2015, when the civil war spread to Western Equatoria State. The human cost has been staggering, if notoriously hard to quantify accurately (Dawkins 2021). One of the most-cited estimates put the “crisis-attributable mortality” in South Sudan between 2013 and 2018 at 383,000 (Checchi et al. 2018), while an estimated 4.5 million people became displaced, of whom at the peak in early 2018 some 2.5 million sought refuge abroad (UNHCR 2024). Deaths, displacements, uncertainty—they have all shaped contemporary South Sudan and the Zande people.

Yet civil war did not only bring destruction. It also reinforced preexisting processes like marketization and urbanization, and created new ties between Zandeland and distant places. By 2015, the main city in Zandeland, Yambio, felt bustling and alive. There were several lively market centers where locals came to trade fruits, vegetables, meat, and honey, while Ugandan, Eritrean, and Sudanese people dominated the trade in drinks, furniture, and office supplies. The dozens of churches attracted American, Scottish, and Australian missionaries, while South Sudanese congregation members were offered scholarships to study in cities like Nairobi, London, or Rome. There was a small but noticeably motley crew of Westerners: in addition to the missionaries there were aid workers, teak loggers, US special forces (out to hunt Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army), and researchers like me. From the small airstrip outside of town, flights would go to South Sudan’s capital Juba and, at first, directly to Arua and Kajjansi in Uganda. Juba was 430 kilometers away over an unpaved and unsafe road, and so Juba always felt quite remote.

In South Sudan, a basic version of Facebook was freely accessible also to those who could not afford internet. Mobile money technology allowed diasporas to send remittances, and South Sudanese with well-paying NGO salaries to sustain their families abroad. These changes



distributed new threats and opportunities across society. The pace of change left many people confused and uncertain, lamenting “cultural erosion.” Both in diaspora and at home, parents’ worries often centered on the children: they have no respect, they do not speak the Zande language, they date outside of the group, they forget where they came from. Many traditional authorities embodied this paradox: on the one hand, they have often lived abroad, gained foreign expertise, and built connections to Juba and beyond. On the other, they also derived legitimacy from their ancestry, belonging to the Avongara clan, and the promise to bolster traditions (Braak 2022). It is against this background that many Azande became supportive of the reinstatement of an Azande Kingdom (Rigterink, Kenyi, and Schomerus 2014; Braak and Kenyi 2018), which ultimately happened on February 9, 2022, the anniversary of the death of King Gbudue on (see Hillary, this issue). We know that ostensibly “traditional” beliefs and practices like witchcraft and magic adapt to societal changes and modern times (Geschiere 1997; Taussig 1987). And so, I turn to explore in what shape Zande witchcraft, oracles, and magic were at the end of this century of massive change.

Redefining witchcraft, oracles, and magic in the twenty-first century

Shortly after Judge Taban³ took up his position at the High Court in Yambio, he was faced with a remarkable case. A man had died in a traffic accident in South Sudan’s capital, Juba. In the Western Equatorial town of Nzara, some four hundred kilometers away from Juba, another man was accused of causing the traffic death with his “medicine” (ngua). When the case was brought before Judge Taban, the suspect admitted that he was guilty and that he had indeed caused the death. Despite this confession, Judge Taban acquitted the suspect for lack of evidence. He felt that he had no choice: “In criminal cases, we work with the presumption of innocence: a person is innocent until his guilt is proven beyond reasonable doubt.” Clearly, Judge Taban continued to doubt the suspect’s guilt despite his confession.

Witchcraft explanations help to answer the question, “*why* did this misfortune befall *this* person?” Zande people who see witchcraft as an inherent part of social rela-

tions may agree on another more immediate cause of death—for instance, head trauma caused by a traffic accident in Juba—but continue their inquiries into the supernatural causes from there. Evans-Pritchard wrote, “Zande beliefs in witchcraft in no way contradict empirical knowledge of cause and effect” (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 25). As Tim Allen put it, “the Azande (like many other African peoples) tend to ask ‘why’ as well as ‘how’ questions about misfortune” (Allen 2007: 375). Where people in other times and places may refer to God’s will, karma, or “bad luck,” in South Sudan many people—not just Azande—believe that forms of witchcraft and sorcery may explain misfortune.

The study of witchcraft is complicated by translation problems. In a Wittgensteinian manner, my understanding of witchcraft is hamstrung by the limitations of the languages I speak, which in turn reflect the particularities of European cultures. Before we try to think about Zande beliefs in English, we must first revisit some of the relevant Zande terminology. Evans-Pritchard often offered the original Zande terms between brackets, but continued thereafter mostly with the English terminology. He explained:

I am not anxious to define witchcraft, oracles, and magic as ideal types of thought, but desire to describe what Azande understand by *mangu*, *soroka*, and *ngua* . . . My aim has been to make a number of English words stand for Zande notions and to use the same term only and always when the same notion is being discussed . . . I do not want to quarrel about words, and if anyone cares to designate these notions and actions by terms other than those I have used I should raise no objection. (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 226)

The trouble is—as Evans-Pritchard was well aware—that often the English terms are rather crude translations for the original Zande practices and beliefs. His translations were awkward at the time, and they are even more so today. In what follows, it is important to keep in mind that the supernatural realm is characterized by a lot of uncertainty, innovation, improvisation, and negotiation, which complicate too neat or static definitions.

“Witchcraft” is the term Evans-Pritchard uses as translation for *mangu*. He explains this phenomenon as follows: “Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them in virtue of an inherent quality. A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act” (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 1). By Evans-Pritchard’s account, Azande

3. All personal names in this article have been replaced with pseudonyms, except for the most high-ranking public figures.

believed that this inherent quality was tied to “a substance in the bodies of witches” (1976: 1) which could be proven by autopsy. He writes that mangu is inherited “by unilinear descent from parent to child” (i.e., mother to daughters, father to sons) (1976: 2) but that people may have this capability without acting on it.

Remarkably, mangu has disappeared among the South Sudanese Azande. In my interviews since 2015, I never came across an allegation of mangu. Similarly, a South Sudanese Zande interlocutor with a keen interest in these phenomena had never heard of such cases in his life. Perhaps the belief that comes closest to mangu now, is *gbegbere ngbaduse* (bad or bitter heart), which is akin to the “evil eye” elsewhere.⁴ Why mangu has disappeared is hard to say. Perhaps the simplest explanation is that occult techniques and fashions evolve—and that Evans-Pritchard researched a variety which was prominent at the time, but which has since faded. By comparison, it is as if he had written a book about “music,” based only on a study of 1920s “ragtime.” Witchcraft, like music, has continued to exist—but this genre, mangu, has disappeared.

In English the term “witchcraft” is used—also by Zande people—as an umbrella term covering a wide range of practices and substances. The Zande term “ngua” (medicine) does the same. Increasingly, when Zande people speak in English of witchcraft they mean a form of ngua. But whereas witchcraft has a clearly negative connotation, ngua is ambivalent. Evans-Pritchard already described how “sorcerers” or “witchdoctors” (*abinza* or *avule*) could do good (*wene ngua*, good magic) or evil (*gbegbere ngua*, bad magic or “sorcery”). Both involved “magical rites using objects fashioned from trees and plants . . . called medicines (*ngua*)” (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 176–77). These practices and the moral ambivalence seem intact today, but the actor is now no longer an *abinza* or *avule* but a *borongua* (*boro* = person, *ngua* = medicine).

4. Like mangu, the “bad heart” may come from Person A to Person B without Person A’s explicit instruction. Person A does not have to go to a specialist or perform any acts themselves, nor may they actively want harm to come to Person B. The “bad heart” may strike from Person A to Person B simply if Person B is somehow doing better than A (and not sharing) or if Person B has wronged Person A. So, there is an element of responsibility with Person B. “Bad heart” may cause harm or loss but is not believed to be as lethal as some ngua.

Ngua simply means medicine. Some ngua are local herbs or trees familiar to most Azande, and used to cure common medical problems. These are the *ngua kaza* (medicines for sickness). Western medicines are referred to as *ngua boromu* (medicine of the foreigner). Other ngua, especially the most powerful ones, are rumored to come from afar—often from the Central African Republic (CAR) where the ability to use these medicines is called *le pouvoir* (the power).⁵ There are specialists who know only positive ngua (or *ziga*, treatments), who might be called traditional healers. Today as in Evans-Pritchard’s days, ngua are often thought only to work when additional rules—“taboos”—are observed by the operator and/or the sender.

The *aborongua* (pl.) are now probably the most common agents in the spiritual realm. Evans-Pritchard translated *borongua* as magician, and in *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic* he focuses mostly on the good medicine such magicians practiced to protect against harm or promote success. Today, the *borongua* is *always* an ambivalent character, able to do good or bad depending on their customer—more like the *abinza* of Evans-Pritchard’s days. Interestingly, the *aborongua* seem to have inherited not just the ambivalence of the *abinza*, but also their English translation: “witchdoctor.” *Aborongua* today also offer divinatory services akin to oracles: verifying if a person has been targeted with ngua, and if so by whom. Subsequently, they offer healing or a referral to a specialized colleague. Should the client so desire, they can also offer the sender a taste of his own medicine or a double dose. Upon request, they may even let the sender “see the red earth” (die).

The *aborongua* operate on a spectrum that I categorize roughly from protective, to self-defense, to pillaging and attacking ngua. These are categorical distinctions not made by Zande people themselves, and in practice forms of ngua may not easily fit. Still, it is clear that ngua vary widely from the harmless things people do to protect themselves and their children, to much more harmful and violent varieties. *Aborongua* may specialize in specific ngua (medicine). This article is too short to do justice to the variety of contemporary witchcraft beliefs and practices among South Sudanese Azande, let alone those of Western Equatoria State or South Sudan as a

5. At the time of writing in 2023, the most feared *borongua* in Yambio is from the Central Africa Republic. He has a powerful *pouvoir* or ngua which is rumored to have attracted such powerful clients as Governor Futuyo and President Kiir.

whole—let alone to offer a comprehensive account of the historical emergence and disappearance of different varieties. Clearly this is a field in constant flux, where techniques may gain popularity in large part by being new. But to illustrate the diversity, I include here some prominent contemporary *ngua* as learned from a key interlocutor.

The *ngua* I categorize as protective include the *nzati* (a sticky plant mixed with magical objects used as protective medicine) which were used in the past to prepare a young child to face this troubled world.⁶ Those *nzati* are disappearing, but a similar cutting technique called by the English term “vaccine” or “anti” has in recent years been used by mature people to guard against all sorts of attacks and harms. A *borongua* may predict your demise through a particular poison⁷ or *ngua*, and in the same seating advocate his own “anti” to protect you. Another type of protective *ngua* includes “anti-bullet,” a medicine that has become common in the wider conflict-affected region.

Under self-defense *ngua*, we might include the *wiri azire* (small magical birds) operated by a *boro azire*. When Person A has a problem with Person B, A can go to the *boro azire* who will send his birds to B. The bird will deliver a message at night, summoning B to come. The next morning, B will have to report to the nearest *boro azire*, explaining what has happened. The *boro azire* will tell B who sent the birds and why. Then B goes to see A, and they together come to the *boro azire* to withdraw his birds from the case and to resolve the issue. If one were to be summoned and refused to come, that person would fall sick in a way that only the *boro azire* could treat. The objective is for B and A to resolve their differences. A statutory county judge remarked that in the eyes of many people in Yambio these *ngua* against theft are quite effective so that the county court hears fewer theft cases: “Theft is also handled by me, but it is not so common. People here believe that if they go to the witch-doctor their stolen properties will be recovered.”

6. It is hard to say exactly where and when these *nzati* were/are still used. An interlocutor told me that his oldest brother (around forty) was still cut in this way, but the younger siblings (late thirties) were not.

7. Poison may be a harmful substance that is ingested through food or drink. In the past it was made of the hair of an aardvark. One could magically (not physically) drop this poison into the cup of someone’s beer, and once the person consumed it they would die.

Another self-defense *ngua* is *aruma*, an object hung especially on fruit trees. It was described to me as something reddish in color, like a completely swollen hand or foot with something resembling toes or fingers. If *aruma* are in place, a hungry person can eat from the tree without punishment. But should they pick a fruit and take it with them when they leave, the *aruma* will consider the person a thief and strike.

A more violent self-defense *ngua* is the *bagbuduma*. Evans-Pritchard translated this as “magic of vengeance” and wrote that it was used in retaliation to an unknown slayer (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 188). These days, that same Zande term is used to refer to a tree (also known by the name *mbasu*) which is used for self-defense. A has placed *bagbuduma* on his property and his family to defend them against threats. If B now touches anything on the farm of A or has a “bad heart” towards A’s family members, he will be attacked and fall sick immediately. Then B must go to a *borongua* and admit what he has done. If he does so right away, the *borongua* may be able to heal him—but if he waits too long there may be nothing the *borongua* can do. Then Person B can die, as may even those who shed as much as a tear over their death. So today, vengeance or “retaliating against a slayer” appears as a very real threat, but the objective appears to be more about deterrence and—when that fails—a relatively proportional harm aimed at encouraging reconciliation.⁸

There are a series of pillaging *ngua* which bring the user benefits at the expense of others. The most common such *ngua* a decade or so ago was *soro*, which is mostly owned by hunters. Using *soro*, they can magically and invisibly remove a person’s flesh or organs without killing them directly. The hunter will then use this flesh to have better luck in hunting. Slowly, the person whose flesh has been removed will fall ill or even die. Another kind of pillaging *ngua* involves selling people to “the people under the river.” The victims of that *ngua* would then die, only to disappear from their graves so that they can be put to work on magical plantations or factories.

Lastly, attacking *ngua* include *masauro* (verb: *sauro*). The specialist can connect this *ngua* to a specific problem, like malaria. When the target falls sick and goes to

8. One *ngua* that is rumored to inflict more disproportional harm is *batungaru* (“I will finish the whole seed”). Once it starts killing, it will kill the whole clan if those who are targeted do not try to reconcile with the sender.



the hospital, doctors will find malaria. But the more they treat the malaria, the sicker their patient will get. Likely the Nzara man who confessed to guilt in the Juba traffic accident, had used a *masauro* attached to traffic accidents. *Masauro* can attract and aggravate such problems. Again, this type can be caused and resolved with the help of a borongua. Another infamous form of attacking ngua are *adandara* (cats), which are the cats that a woman may give birth to after having a cat as her second husband. She then becomes the owner of these cats and can send them to people with whom she has problems. Once that person sees the cat, they are doomed to die. There is a great taboo about speaking about having seen the cat, which may be one reason why one might not hear often about *adandara* anymore.

Crucially, alleging that someone has used pillaging ngua or attacking ngua is different from the more benevolent varieties, because here the receiver of the medicine has done nothing to earn the ire of the sender who acts self-interestedly and wishes harm on his fellow man with or without personal gain in return. This kind of witchcraft is about violence and extraction.

In recent years a powerful new occult technique has arrived in Western Equatoria. The specialists are commonly called borongua but differ in important ways: they do not work from under trees, but from within houses. And the source of their strength is not primarily their ngua (which they also have), but their perfume which they use to attract a woman, *Mami Wata* (also known as Mami River; see Craze, this issue). This woman lives under the river and is the second wife of the operator, who is always a man. Upon client request, the operator uses the perfume to attract his *Mami Wata* to his shrine. When she arrives, she already knows everything about the person, their problem, and the future. *Mami Wata* can act as a punisher in a dispute, but she is also believed to accept human sacrifices in return for wealth (see Craze, this issue). In either case, the victim would disappear after being pulled through water—a stream, river, even a puddle of rainwater on the street—into a subterranean channel (*akpiri*). Once someone is pulled in, they will die. The only thing the specialist can do is find the dead body. Normally, if a person dies in water, they float. But when a person is killed through *akpiri*, the dead body cannot be found until the specialist performs his medicine (*toga ime*, drop water) in the water where the victim disappeared, and then the corpse will start floating. *Mami Water* appears to be new among the South Sudanese Zande; it bears a striking resemblance to the *Mami Wata*

phenomenon across West, Central, and Southern Africa (Drewal 2008).

The wider societal context in which witchcraft and magic operate has also radically changed since the time of Evans-Pritchard. Zande society has become more monetized, and many respondents argued that magic, sorcery, and witchcraft have become money-making business. Self-proclaimed specialists are ever quick to adapt to modern fears; selling anti-bullet for times of war and vaccines against COVID-19. In this busy, opaque, and ever-changing marketplace, prospective clients must decide who is the charlatan and who the real expert. Who can be trusted with your deepest fears, your protection, or your hatred? And who is worth the money? Meanwhile, South Sudanese society has also become much more Christian, and several churches organize intensive prayers against forms of witchcraft. And, as we shall see, internationals—here in particular Human Rights Officers from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)—have also gotten involved especially in combating witchcraft prosecutions.

And yet for all these changes, there are continuities too: many South Sudanese Azande continue to believe that many deaths and serious problems are the result of supernatural attacks, that supernatural forces can cause harm or promote success, that danger can emanate from the most intimate spheres (e.g., spouses, family members, neighbors, colleagues), and that this mercurial and invisible world is best navigated with the help of specialists. The realm remains opaque and confusing, making fertile soil for suspicion and allegations. When disputes arrive at court, local authorities must navigate these murky waters and uncertainties, and create a semblance of moral clarity.

Disputing witchcraft, oracles, and magic

Clearly, not all practices associated with witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the South Sudanese Azande are considered immoral, let alone worthy of litigation. But for certain disputes—those which have “defeated” out-of-court attempts at resolution—people turn to local courts for adjudication or advice. In interviews with chiefs and customary court judges, we found that many cite witchcraft among the most common problems that affect their communities, and which appear before them. In what follows, I explore the kinds of witchcraft-related cases that end up before chiefs and customary courts, and how those cases are dealt with. I examine the emergence



and transformation of disputes (Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat 1981) based on studies of cases that have reached local customary courts.

South Sudan's judicial infrastructure is clear on paper but much less so in practice. There is a rough duality between the customary or chief's courts (at the boma-level [A courts], at the payam-level [B courts], and at the county-level [C courts]) and the statutory or government courts (county court, high court, court of appeal, supreme court). The relation between these two sets is context-dependent, but in theory litigants can appeal all the way from the lowest boma-level to the supreme court. Crucially, the law also stipulates that there are statutory courts in every county, but in practice at the time of my research only three out of ten counties of Western Equatoria State had working county courts. Conversely, not all existing courts correspond to legal categorizations and stipulations (Leonardi et al. 2010: 20). Rather than systematic clarity, a patchwork prevails "of courts run by chiefs, laypersons, and judges with varying degrees of legitimacy, qualifications, and legal status" (Leonardi et al. 2010: 18). Still the customary courts in Yambio clearly differed from the statutory courts.

The customary A, B, and C courts technically only have jurisdiction over civil cases unless a criminal case with a significant customary component is referred to them by a competent statutory court.⁹ In Western Equatoria, some saw the customary courts as the heirs of pre-colonial justice systems. But many of the courts' forms and functions were shaped in the colonial era. Since then, conflict and displacement have left their mark: court buildings and records were destroyed; returnees came with new notions of rights; and particular returnee-chiefs brought new ideas on the relations between people and authority (Braak 2022; Leonardi 2013). These diverging histories have resulted in customary courts that differ in physical appearance, location, popularity, number and type of cases, staffing, the sanctions they apply, and the sources of law they refer to. Some customary courts were held in large stone structures with iron roofs, others under mango trees. The B court in Yambio was open most days and had heard 293 cases in less than a year; the B court in the village of Sakure over the same period had only heard 47 cases (Braak 2022: 127). Generally, customary courts were staffed by judges who were selected by the presiding chiefs from within the local

communities. Such customary judges included chiefs, headmen, headwomen, and respected problem-solvers in local society. None had studied law and many had not finished primary school. Often, they sat in panels of three with one female member. At other times there was a single judge. In addition to the customary and statutory courts, there were informal or nonstate public authorities who dealt with witchcraft cases: the borongua themselves, neighbors, elders, and chiefs (out of court).

So how do people first decide that an occult harm may have been perpetrated against them? And how do disputes related to witchcraft emerge? There are different beginnings. Sometimes, a person may not yet have suffered misfortune, but encounters evidence of occult practices against them, e.g., a charm or some rumors or intelligence about an ill-wisher. They then take preemptive action through a borongua, Christian charismatics, or local chiefs, to get the sender to withdraw their ngua and/or to disarm it.

In other cases, some misfortune has already occurred: a person has died, had an accident, or fallen gravely ill. After misfortune, some people immediately suspect ngua. Others first try to find medical care. But when doctors struggle to find the cause of the illness or the patient does not respond to treatment, people may forego the further pursuit of medical explanations and solutions and instead explore occult explanations. A young man in Yambio put it plainly: "If I am sick and a hospital cannot cure me, it means there is witchcraft involved." In some instances, the doctors even suggest that patients try the traditional pathway.

Once people believe that witchcraft is at play, they may first try to verify this and identify the perpetrator. Sometimes a specialist is involved: a witchdoctor (borongua—the abinza of Evans-Pritchard's days have disappeared) or an oracle (*soroka*).¹⁰ Oracles limit themselves to divination and identification (see Marko, this issue), while witchdoctors can also halt the harm or even return it—upon request, in aggravated form—to the sender. At other times, the alleged victim suspects someone directly. One such instance was when a catechist met a local farmer named Daniel on the road to their respective farms outside of Yambio. They greeted one another and walked on. The next day, the catechist suddenly felt

9. Local Government Act, 2009.

10. Soroka (oracles) have remained active, although new techniques and practitioners have arisen (see Marko, this issue) while some aborongua now also offer divinatory services.



dizzy and fainted. When the catechist woke up among a crowd of concerned community members, no one from Daniel's family was there. The catechist's encounter with Daniel and his family's suspicious absence the next day led the crowd to suspect Daniel of *soro* (a pillaging witchcraft).

Once the perpetrator has been identified, people adopt different tactics. Sometimes, people confront the alleged perpetrator directly. Often, the perpetrator is a relative and people first try to resolve the situation within the family sphere. Back in Evans-Pritchard's days, it was entirely plausible that *mangu* could have harmed someone without the sender's intent. Now, *mangu* has disappeared. Still, it is possible that a person has caused harm without instruction when their defensive charms or "stings" were activated. This was the case with Frank, whose nephew explained:

[After going to the oracle] we came to realize that it was Moses who was causing all these problems. We went to Moses and told him . . . Moses said that he has no connection with what is happening to our uncle. But [he added] "if your uncle is having a bad heart against me, my stings can fall on him . . . in case anyone has a bad heart against me or is trying to do something bad, my magic will fall on him by itself before I send it. This might be what is causing sickness to your uncle."

In cases in which a self-defense *ngua* has harmed someone, it is entirely possible to resolve matters amicably at home with neighbors or family members mediating. It is when the sent witchcraft was of a more malign kind—pillaging or attacking—that people may respond more aggressively.

Again, not all pillaging or attacking *ngua* allegations are brought to chiefs or customary courts. Partly, this reflects a wider truism in the study of (legal) disputes that people may suffer in silence, strike back in kind, or decide that the benefits of disputing do not outweigh the risks and costs (Albiston and Sandefur 2013; Sandefur 2019). In some cases, local society may gossip about witchcraft being at play, but nobody will initiate any proceedings to investigate or adjudicate the case. In Craze's article in this issue, when a young rich woman died in a freak accident, local society interpreted it as the consequence of her trade with Mami Wata, and the local chiefs said there was no body, no investigation, no relatives demanding explanation, and really no role for the chiefs.

Sometimes people attack the accused sender. Daniel, for instance, was attacked by a mob at night with ma-

chetes and sticks, and chased to the home of the executive chief. The chief sent the people away and Daniel to the hospital where he spent three days recovering. In witchcraft cases, power considerations may play an outsized role in who gets accused by whom. The weak, poor, or elderly may readily and publicly be accused of witchcraft, while the powerful and rich may be suspected but not accused (Geschiere 2018). This leads to a methodological concern that by focusing on witchcraft accusations in the public realm and especially at local courts, one may only get part of the picture: the part of witchcraft allegedly committed by the weak and poor.

Many cases in customary courts that *involve* elements of witchcraft, are not *mainly about* witchcraft. This relates to another methodological point. If one were to study (the prevalence of) witchcraft disputes in customary courts by looking at the court records kept by the clerk, one would miss a lot. Those records offer a crude summary of the people involved, their dispute, and the court's response. Often, that record will only include terms related to witchcraft if that was the main allegation or claim. Our team attended customary court hearings for weeks, and we found that very often cases that involve witchcraft are mainly about family, land, or money, or a mixture of all three. One of the parties may use witchcraft (or an allegation) to intimidate the other into forfeiting their claim or into accepting third-party involvement. So, witchcraft can be a disputing instrument, not the ultimate purpose or focus of a dispute. Local courts in South Sudan understood this, and would often try to deal with both the witchcraft and the underlying cause of the dispute.

Crucially, cases that were mainly about witchcraft were often brought to the customary courts not by the alleged victim, but by the suspected sender—who hoped to prove their innocence. That is, often suspected senders "ran to the court" out of fear of a violent revenge should the allegation against them not be authoritatively refuted. The turn to court was often a desperate last-ditch effort to defuse tensions. This was the case for Daniel. While he was still in the hospital, his attackers threatened that they would come back to cut off his ears. After he was released from the hospital, Daniel rushed to Yambio's B court to open a case against the people who threatened him, saying "I want to swear by the Bible to show that I am innocent of their accusations." Or, consider another case. A man had been together with his wife for several years, but as he was unable to pay the outstanding dowry the marriage began deteriorating. He heard that his wife



was going out without him, and suspected her of adultery. All of this was no reason to go to court. But then the man's wife fell sick and her brother (the man's brother-in-law) accused him of witchcraft:

I heard that my wife was sick . . . The following day my younger brother came to me and said that my brother-in-law called him and told him to tell me that I should stand warned because I have been bewitching his sister and once his sister dies, he will just come directly to me and start the killing with me, and then go to all my family members . . . When I looked into this issue, I found myself innocent. I went to my brother-in-law so that he could tell me face to face. When I reached him, I pretended that I did not hear anything. He told me, "Good enough you have come. There is a problem. Three times underwear of my sister got lost plus a blouse in your house, and now she has fallen sick. We consulted the witchdoctor around and they told me you are the one who took my sister's belongings to the witchdoctor. So, I am telling you: once my sister dies, that will be the end of you and your whole family." I became very scared and worried because this brother-in-law of mine is also a witch. Maybe he [will harm] me and yet I am innocent. So, I had to run to the B court to swear on the Holy Bible to prove to my in-laws that I am not doing any evil thing to my wife.

Clearly it was the fear of a violent revenge—possibly using *ngua*—that drove this man to the B court. Although the court allowed him to swear on the Bible that he was innocent, this hardly improved his marriage. He reflected somberly: "When I sat down and reasoned why my wife was behaving like that, I found that it is peer pressure. Her friends are telling her to leave me because they say that I am not smart and clean, that I am too dirty. Also, they say that I have HIV/AIDS and yet it is not true."

Divorce cases sometimes also involved *ngua* as cause, catalyst, or both. One couple had been happily married for six years. Then, the woman said she was pregnant and yet her belly did not grow, and no baby came. The husband narrated the deterioration from there:

I asked her to find out where the child goes, because she had been pregnant for a year. She answered: "Perhaps your ex-wife has eaten the child with her witchcraft. I heard that she is a terrible woman!" I asked her what evidence shows that my former wife was a witchdoctor. My wife asked me: "Why are you siding with your ex-wife? Are you still in love with her?" I called my clan elder to settle the issue at home. The elder warned her against issuing false accusations, but my wife would

not change. Then I took her to the headman, who warned her for the second time. When we came home, I wanted to take "one for the road" [have sex] but my wife would not allow me to share the bed with her anymore. She told me that she had gone to the witchdoctor who gave her a charm: "If we share love now, your private part will be paralyzed." I could not believe it and I continued demanding for my right to be given [to have sex]. But she said, "unless you kill me and use my dead body." I was so annoyed and felt like beating her to death. I took the case to the subchief. My wife told the subchief that if he were to send her back to my home, she would poison either me or herself. When the subchief heard that he asked me for my decision, [and] then I decided to give her the divorce letter.

This dispute is illustrative in its complexity. There may be elements of infertility and pressure to have children, jealousy over a past relationship, accusations and counter-accusations, the use of a peculiar self-defense *ngua*, (the threat of) domestic violence, and finally the divorce. The wife accused the ex-wife of witchcraft, and also invoked her own *ngua* cleverly to avoid intercourse and finally coerce a divorce. In this dispute as in many others, no one got convicted for using *ngua*, but these (allegations of) occult acts were nonetheless taken very seriously by local authorities, clan elder, headman, and subchief. The suspected involvement of *ngua* made it less feasible for the local authorities to aim for their default response in domestic friction and violence cases—a restoration of the *status quo ante*—as they feared that the wife would kill herself or her husband.

Procedurally, customary courts establish guilt or innocence by reference to testimonies, a variety of external oracles (see Marko, this issue),¹¹ and the accused may be asked to swear an oath on the Bible and/or spit water from the mouth. In 2014–2016 in Yambio, Nzara, Tambura, and Ezo, we found the same practice of oath-swearing that was explained by a paramount chief to Allen during his research in Ezo in the 1990s: "The one who is accused will come to my court and will swear on the Bible that he is innocent. Sometimes he is given a special water to drink. If he vomits, then he is the one. It confirms he is a witch" (Allen 2007: 376). The precise wording of the oath may vary, but often includes a variation of, "I swear that I did not bewitch this person or else the power of the Holy Bible may strike me down." This is also the

11. I never saw an oracle, but my research assistants heard of the use of *dakpa* (termite oracles) in Yambio, Gangura, and Ri-Rangu.

underlying premise: lying under oath on the Bible would cause certain death. In the words of a subchief: “If there is witchcraft [accusations], we always make them to spray water from the mouth and swear on the Bible. If they did not bewitch the person, they will not die. If they did bewitch the person, they may die.”

The sentences that customary courts handed out for witchcraft allegations varied widely and depended on the disputants. If the oath sworn by the suspected sender satisfies the accusers, life may continue as normal, and no one may need to go to prison. But in some cases, chiefs have sentenced suspected senders of *ngua* to prison *not* because they were convinced that the sender was guilty, but rather because they believed that the sender’s life would be in danger if they were not imprisoned. Judge Taban gave one such example from Tambura:

Christine’s husband wanted to marry a second wife, but Christine objected, threatening, “If you bring her to this house, I will do away with you.” The husband continued. After six months he got paralyzed, fell sick, and died. His relatives recalled Christine’s words. They did not bother going to a hospital because [they took] for granted that he had been bewitched. Then the relatives wanted to kill Christine. The public prosecutor could not deal with the case so the paramount chief imprisoned her indefinitely to save her life. She has been in prison now for two months.

Sometimes customary courts would send accused witchcraft-senders to prison for their own protection, and at other times because the court deemed the accused guilty. Importantly, prisons in Western Equatoria are far from the impenetrable concrete blocks that some readers may have in mind. Prisons may consist of a collection of grass-thatched clay huts (*tukuls*) without a perimeter fence. Life as a prisoner is equally not as solitary and idle as that of prisoners in many other contexts. According to the prison director in Ezo: “The prisoners help with the construction of the new prison accommodation. They can also carry water, clean, and do small-small work within the compound.” Many urban prisons also operate “prison camps” in more rural areas where prisoners cultivate groundnuts, maize, and sorghum.¹²

12. I insert here a snippet from my diary after visiting a prison in Ezo on March 26, 2015:

Felix and I take a bodaboda from the central market in Ezo to the prison. It’s a five-minute ride, and when reaching the prison I think we’re just in another

Ontology and law: Judges and UNMISS freeing witchcraft suspects

Witchcraft proved to be a central bone of contention in Western Equatoria between the customary and statutory courts. Responding to local beliefs in the existence of harmful and even lethal witchcraft (*ngua*), some customary courts sentenced accused witchcraft-senders to prison because they were convinced of their guilt, and at other times for the accused’s protection. In either case, such convictions would often be overturned by higher statutory courts.

In Western Equatoria State all the statutory judges I interviewed had studied law, mostly in Khartoum. They all came from other parts of South Sudan, and lacked professional interpreters to speak with litigants in local languages. Fundamentally, many judges did not share the witchcraft beliefs of the local society in which they served. Even when they did, they felt bound to apply statutory law. So, when they were presented with witchcraft cases, they found it impossible to formulate a response based on the law, respecting the rights of the accused, while also satisfying the complainants or alleged victims. It is worth quoting High Court Judge Taban at some length:

Witchcraft is rampant in Tambura. But there is a problem. The paramount chief was trying to prove to me that witchcraft exists. But as a man of law, I do not consider these things. There are two types of witchcraft. First, poisoning—which is a criminal offense for which we can have evidence. Witchcraft cases might be tried as poisoning under the Criminal Procedures Act. There was a lady who washed a snake in the water that you use to wash a dead body. They should have sent that material to the laboratory to prove that it was poisonous. Second, there is supernatural witchcraft. Then there is no proof, no evidence. It does exist, because people believe in it. It needs to be fought because it sabotages our development . . . [But] in criminal law you need to prove the relation between the act and the consequence. (italics are mine)

neighbourhood. There are no fences or gates, no checkpoints. Just a collection of tukuls like everywhere else. The premises are 250 by 200 meters. It is quite wide and there is ample shade under the tall mango trees. The prison gives me a laid-back and clean impression. Of course the fundamental fact is there: being imprisoned often for very arbitrary violations proven in an arbitrary way. But for a prison in South Sudan, it doesn’t seem all that horrible here.

This quote illustrates how statutory judges and courts in South Sudan struggle to deal with witchcraft as the associated practices are only very partially criminalized in law. The predicament was essentially the same in colonial times, when colonial officials and South Sudanese people alike rather pragmatically began translating a wide variety of vernacular terms and practices as “poison” to enable prosecution (Leonardi 2007). An affair in February 2024 in which a business woman, Achai Wiir, was first accused of witchcraft, but then arrested and detained on charges of misappropriation, defamation, and assault also comes to mind. The police spokesperson simply listed: “There are three articles from the criminal code, and they are 246 (Criminal Misappropriation), 289 (Defamation), and 225 (Assault or Criminal Force Without Provocation)” (*Sudans Post* 2024).

Yet during my research in Western Equatoria, many statutory judges proved stricter—releasing those people accused of witchcraft whom the lower customary courts had earlier sentenced to prison, sometimes after being tipped off by the UNMISS Human Rights Officer. The above-quoted Judge Taban recounted how previously he had been stationed in Bentiu (not in Western Equatoria). When he arrived there, he discovered that fifty-six people were imprisoned on witchcraft charges. Judge Taban annulled these convictions for lack of evidence, and released everyone. That same day, one of the released was murdered. This anecdote painfully illustrates an age-old dilemma: when judicial authorities do not respond to alleged social transgressions such as witchcraft, there is a risk that people will take matters into their own hands.

Many Western Equatorian chiefs objected vehemently to what they perceived as the blatant disregard by judges and UN officials for the local social and cultural reality. An experienced subchief shared his views:

Witchcraft is real. It is found in our traditions and cultures. Everyone on this earth has their own cultures and traditions. [But] the judges and those who work for the [UNMISS] human right always release witchcraft cases from the prison because they do not know how to solve it. But for us who are the traditional leaders, we know how to solve such cases. And it is our responsibility to talk about it. How I wish the judges and human right actors who release witchcraft suspects could be beaten with one traditional herb. [Then] they would really know that witchcraft exists. The human rights are affecting our ruling.

The international staff working for UNMISS (e.g., the Human Rights Officers, “the human right”) or UNDP,

were often conscious of the treacherous terrain. They—like South Sudanese people themselves—were uncertain how to respond. One senior rule of law expert with UNDP reflected:

The judicial system is supposed to work within its given society. Currently the judicial system fails to prosecute witchcraft cases, and that is a weakness as seen by the society. Perhaps it is better to have ten innocent people free than one innocent person in prison. But what if ten thousand people lose faith in the judicial system?

And so, witchcraft cases were indicative of wider shortcomings of the judicial system, the customary and statutory courts, and the links between them. Chiefs and judges were all too aware of their own institution’s limitations (Braak 2016).

Many chiefs thought that their role in dispute resolution could be improved by clearer customary law, and an improved relation with the statutory courts. In the words of the subchief, “What we are waiting for is only our customary law and this is what we are going to follow strictly.” There were two competing initiatives to “ascertain” or codify customary law in South Sudan: one by UNDP (infused with the substantive human rights concerns that traditional authorities had objections to), and one by the state Minister of Local Government. Despite renewed efforts around the Azande Kingdom’s restoration in 2022 to reconstruct Zande customary law or even a “Constitution for the Azande Kingdom,” little progress towards codification or consensus seems to have been made thus far (see Hillary, this issue).

Perhaps a more pragmatic direction was found in Tambura, where the paramount chief (the highest traditional authority) and Judge Taban (the highest statutory judicial authority) initiated conversations and occasional phone calls about specific cases. The Local Government Act envisions such interaction between statutory and customary courts in Section 99, clause 7:C, where it allows judges to refer “criminal cases of a customary nature” to the paramount chiefs’ C courts. This seems to reflect an understanding that local customary authorities may know local beliefs, practices, and social relations better, and that they may be better equipped to resolve the underlying strained relations within the household, family, clan, or neighborhood that are so commonly at the root of witchcraft accusations. Despite the shortage of judges and their difficulty in dealing with witchcraft cases, most judges interviewed remained reluctant to cede criminal cases to customary courts.



Conclusion

Evans-Pritchard's old ethnographic picture of the Azande is in urgent need of an update. Contemporary Azande live in the modern world, with mobile phones, WhatsApp groups, mobile money, and global allegiances to Christian denominations and English football clubs. Modern times and global connections, even if they were catalyzed by conflict-induced migration, have clearly brought much good. But Azande, like many people across the world, worry that globalization and modernization are also threatening to "erode" their culture and traditions. This fear of loss galvanized the reinstatement of an Azande Kingdom (see Hillary, this issue), and it also motivated some elders to speak with me, a foreign anthropologist, so that I could "document the culture for the children." Against this backdrop of change, feared cultural erosion, and attempts at conservation, this article has revisited some central notions in Evans-Pritchard's work.

Witchcraft, oracles, and magic—the three pillars of Evans-Pritchard's seminal ethnography on the Azande—have witnessed continuities and changes. Many Zande continue to attribute (some) misfortune to ill-will and occult forces. Yet mangu, what Evans-Pritchard translated as "witchcraft," has disappeared. In its place has come an ever-changing variety of "medicines" (ngua). In this article, I have categorized these ngua on a spectrum from the protective and self-defense ngua to more malicious pillaging or attacking ngua. Victims' and local authorities' responses differed accordingly.

Today, as in Evans-Pritchard's time, ngua are not best understood simply as transgressions. Many ngua are aimed to prevent or deter future wrongdoing, or to remedy or punish past wrongdoing. All but the pillaging ngua allow for the restoration of a moral order in a way not dissimilar to laws and courts. Some ngua resolve interpersonal problems and even when brought to light, they do not lead to further disputes or litigation. They offer a way for people to stake claims backed by supernatural threats and the involvement of a specialist aborongua. Other powerful ngua are alleged to exist, but are never brought to local authorities (see Craze, this issue).

Yet sometimes ngua-related disputes are brought to the customary courts. There are two basic varieties. First, frequently cases that involve witchcraft are mainly about something else: family, land, or money, or a mixture of all three. Witchcraft then represents the escalation of this preexisting dispute, not the central focus for any of the concerned parties. Second, sometimes witchcraft is the

central focus of the dispute. Remarkably, most of such cases are brought to the customary courts not by the alleged victim, but by the alleged sender. This alleged sender may fear a violent revenge and mob justice if the allegation is not authoritatively refuted. And so, alleged senders come to court to prove their innocence—often by swearing an oath on the Bible.

Customary courts benefit from their interstitial position between local communities and the state. They can be responsive to local understandings of different types of ngua, and the troubled social relations that often underpin witchcraft allegations and practices. By working in local languages, they avoid some of the analytical quagmires that come with translation, and they can tailor their responses accordingly. Yet, customary courts have very limited jurisdiction over criminal cases, and so their responses to witchcraft allegations are carefully watched (and sometimes overruled) by judges and UN officials.

Translation, categorization, and normative ordering are slow processes, which struggle to describe and order social realities as opaque, contested, and changeable as witchcraft. By the time this article is published, new forms of ngua will have appeared, and new accidents will have fed new interpretations of the occult. After Heraclitus: No man ever steps in the same river twice, because it is not the same man, and it is not the same river. But since the time of Evans-Pritchard, some elements of witchcraft and its place in society have remained the same: it is still a man crossing a river.

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