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SPECIAL SECTION: REVISITING THE AZANDE

Revisiting the Azande

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This introduction to a special section, “Revisiting the Azande,” summarizes the historical context and theoretical insights of the classic ethnography *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande*, by E. E. Evans-Pritchard. It describes developments in Zandeland over the century since the book was written and provides synopses of the articles in the collection. The Azande have lived through a turbulent century; witchcraft and oracular practices, and “Zande tradition,” have been steadfast but nevertheless hard to pin down and constantly changing tools for Zande people as they have managed the upheavals.

Keywords: Azande, South Sudan, Central African Republic, witchcraft, oracles, magic, Evans-Pritchard

In Yambio, South Sudan, on February 9, 2022, King Ato-roba Peni Rikito was crowned monarch of the Azande Kingdom. He was the first Zande king to reign since the death of King Gbudue, his great-grandfather, 117 years earlier. The thousands of people who attended brought all the markers of Zande tradition that they could. The dress code was bark cloth, but bark cloth is rare these days, so most people wore brown fabric that the organizers had authorized as a substitute. Each member of the crowd had brought at least one item—a pot, a hat, a drum, some beads, a bell—that he or she thought of as traditionally Zande and brandished it proudly. Gbudue’s tomb had been refurbished for the occasion and was guarded by Zande men carrying the fearsome spears and shields their precolonial forebears were known for deftly wielding. Upon close inspection, though, their weapons were cardboard facsimiles. South Sudanese soldiers carrying noncardboard Kalashnikovs filled the crowd, whose members danced as musicians played new songs evoking Zande unity.

At around the same time, across the border from Yambio in the Central African Republic (CAR), a new, predominantly Azande armed group was emerging. Calling itself Azande Ani Kpi Gbe (AAKG), it has battled for control of its home prefecture, Haut Mbomou. Its actions, as well as rousing songs and messages shared via WhatsApp and Facebook messaging groups, have ral-

lied Azande from South Sudan, the CAR, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to their cause. Zande culture, traditions, and collective political action are effulgent, more important than they have been for over a century, but also more improvised. And who, really, are the Azande?

If you, who are not from the region, have heard of the Zande¹ kingdoms, chances are near total that your knowledge comes from anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s classic book *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande*, published in 1937. Evans-Pritchard conducted the research for the book between 1926 and 1930, several decades into British colonial rule in the area. He depicted the Azande largely as they had lived prior to the entrenchment of colonialism. The book describes the idioms and practices Zande people used to ascribe accountability when “unfortunate events”—in Evans-Pritchard’s now-famous turn of phrase—befell them. The book explains the logical consistency of Zande understandings of witchcraft. A subtle reader will pick up on Evans-Pritchard’s subsequent, additional, point, which was that his argument applied to other systems of folk belief, including those held by his fellow British. The book used the Azande as a case to reveal traits of

1. “Azande” is the noun form of the name, referring to the people, and “Zande” is the adjectival form.



sensation, but Evans-Pritchard's tome on witchcraft among the Azande was one. In an appreciation of the life of "E-P" (as friends and colleagues knew him) shortly after his death, his student Thomas O. Beidelman rated the book "unquestionably the best ever written about an African people and one of the truly great books in anthropology" (1974: 560). Fifty years of writing have intervened between then and now; people can disagree about how the rankings have changed. But Beidelman's overall assessment of the book's importance stands:

[The book] begins by presenting the thought of one society; it proceeds to use these data to re-evaluate and correct earlier anthropological conceptions about the nature of thought in preliterate societies; and it ends by implying that common features of rationality, non-rational, existential assumptions and conventional compartmentalization (in the interest of sentiment and self-interest) characterize all thought systems everywhere. The gulf between the Azande and us exists, but it is far less than we might think. Never before had the thought of a preliterate society been considered so carefully and with such empathy. (Beidelman 1974: 561)

The book, in other words, took up the question of whether all people, living all manner of lifestyles—from those then called primitive to those centered on cities and higher education—think alike. It answered affirmatively. Details of thought and meaning are diverse, intricate, and creative, but the structures of thought, Evans-Pritchard found, are similar. The book's argument is carefully built over hundreds of pages. Here is one small piece to serve as an illustration: what Evans-Pritchard termed secondary elaborations. Oracles' tests sometimes produced contradictory or unclear results. Did that not make people question the tests' veracity? No, Evans-Pritchard explained, because they had a range of reasons at the ready to explain why the test could have failed *in this instance* but still be valid overall. Perhaps one taboo or another had not been properly respected? Thus, while there were inconsistencies in their beliefs about witchcraft and magic, those inconsistencies did not concern them, because, as Kwame Anthony Appiah summed up in his introductory philosophy textbook, the Azande "had no reason to suspect they might be wrong" (2003: 343). The same could be said of many other folk explanations of misfortune, which always include secondary elaborations.

The fact that the Azande have a prominent role in a leading philosophy textbook indicates the importance of Evans-Pritchard's work to the sociology of knowledge. Fellow anthropologists at the time understood both the specific arguments he was making about the Azande, and the broader arguments about the nature of thought and reasoning. For instance, his friend Max Gluckman, a Jewish and South African anthropologist, used Evans-Pritchard's Azande work to bolster his critiques of "labour relations on South African farms" and Nazi ideology (cited in Werbner 2013: 651). More recently, some anthropologists have defined Evans-Pritchard's scope more narrowly, as being about "*a belief in witches and witchcraft, and about a specific cultural approach to misfortune*" (Mills 2013: 21, emphasis in the original; cited in Werbner 2013: 650). That, indeed, is how many beginning anthropology students understand the text based on their exposure to it in their classes, which usually takes the form of some pages excerpted from the book's abridged version, published in 1976. Seeing the book as solely a portrait of an idiosyncratic belief system, as readers of the abridged version are probably more likely to do, is like seeing Hamlet as nothing but a story of a long-dead Danish king.

And indeed, a range of sensitive readers have used Evans-Pritchard's arguments as crime scene detectives use UV light: a force that reveals the—figurative—fingerprints and connections that were always there but cannot be seen using the tools of everyday common sense. For instance, Karen E. Fields used Evans-Pritchard's description of witchcraft to pull apart what she and her sister Barbara Fields refer to as American racecraft. Fields noted that while race has visible components, its real force in American life comes from the invisible aspects: the diffuse but powerful beliefs about what the visible traits mean, what they reveal about the person who carries them. And those invisible elements consist of a number of assumptions about causality, about culpability, about misfortune—about all the kinds of things that Zande beliefs about witchcraft entail. Tell an American that race is not real and she will likely respond much like one of the Azande portrayed in Evans-Pritchard's work who has been told that witchcraft is not real: the question has no sense, since the "sensible outputs" (Fields and Fields 2012: 204)—that is, the consequences in the social world—of racecraft and witchcraft are so glaringly obvious to those who "have no reason to suspect they might be wrong" to think in those ways.



This collection is not an extensive critical review of Evans-Pritchard's work on the Azande, which can be found elsewhere (e.g., Beidelman 1974; Douglas 1980; Morton 2020). However, there are unusual aspects of *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic* that are frequently ignored or unknown by contemporary readers. The book was first published in 1937 as a hardcover edition of 558 pages with thirty pages of photographs. This made the book too expensive for most students—and therefore less profitable for the publisher. In 1976, Eva Gillies edited a radically abridged paperback version of only 265 pages (including Gillies's introduction), published by Clarendon Press. In a damning review, Beidelman wrote:

The two most striking aspects of Evans-Pritchard's monograph are its extraordinary detail, which reveals both the credibility and complexity of the Azande belief system, and the elegant progression of the exposition. The very nature of the stringent abridgement annihilates these features so much that no reader could possibly imagine the true character of the original work. (Beidelman 1977: 180)

For instance: the original text is full of the voices of Evans-Pritchard's Zande interlocutors. He was an early champion of oral history. By including long-form Azande texts he clearly meant to let Azande respondents (also) speak for themselves to contemporary and future readers. The abridgment also omits Evans-Pritchard's original dedication to Major Larken, "District Commissioner in Zandeland 1911–1932, in admiration for his service to the Azande and in token of friendship," and his acknowledgment on the first page that the costs of his "expeditions" were mainly borne by "the Government of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, at whose invitation they were carried out" (Evans-Pritchard 1937: vii). In other words, Evans-Pritchard was transparent about his relation to the colonial government. These were progressive acts. The subsequent abridgment undermined much of Evans-Pritchard's original effort. And yet it is that abridged version which became much more widely available, read, and criticized (see Braak 2022).

Two fundamental and recurrent criticisms are that Evans-Pritchard focused excessively on order, unity, and equilibrium, and that he ignored the colonial context in which he worked (Hutchinson 1996: 28; Shipton 2009: 87; Leonardi 2013: 6). Both the unabridged original ethnography and his later work suggest that Evans-Pritchard was acutely aware of these challenges (Evans-

Pritchard 1971, 1973; see also Braak, this issue; Geschiere, this issue), and that he had come to "see his ethnographic accounts as historical texts . . . and products of their time" (Allen 2023: 209). No other anthropological text—classic or contemporary—is known primarily through the mediated form of an edited abridgment.²

One of the tasks anthropology has historically taken on has been building a monument honoring cultural and cognitive diversity, and Evans-Pritchard's work contributes several crucial foundational bricks. But for people living far from Zandeland, who learn about the Azande from this old book, "the Azande" can start to seem like a beautiful, important thought experiment. People encounter "the Azande" in textbooks, and a few pages later they encounter a trolley problem or the five genders of Bugis people in Indonesia. The thriving yet troubled contemporary human society of Zande people is completely absent. The book is old—that's part of it. But perhaps even more, the book describes a period of Zande life that predated Evans-Pritchard's time with them by several decades. He wrote in an "ethnographic present" tense that was in fact a reconstruction of life a few decades earlier, prior to the arrival of colonial administrators. That precolonial life can seem very foreign to contemporary readers' own. Therefore, this collection returns to Zandeland to again learn from people there: how have their ideas about witchcraft, oracles, and magic transformed through the years? How are the Azande people returning to traditions and rebuilding ethnically based institutions to attempt to thrive amidst the violent conflict that plagues all three countries that Zandeland spreads into?

Live from Zandeland

Hopefully the above description will inspire at least a few people to read the original text, with its careful, but not didactic, exposition, and the manifold Zande voices who speak to readers across the century that now separates us from their utterances. But neither the abridged version nor the original can tell us about the transformations and turbulence in Azande life since then.

2. And in this singular case, the abridgment was excoriated by the most knowledgeable critics when it was released. Beidelman rated the editing of the abridged version "execrable" and "abuse" (Beidelman 1977: 180, 181), but few contemporary readers realize just how much was lost in this unusual effort to shorten a classic.



Both in the past and today, the Azande have used the term Ringara Zande—Zandeland—as a call for unity. In precolonial times, “the Azande” were in fact a number of semi-connected and expanding kingdoms, some more powerful than others, spread throughout the geographic center of the African continent. The first outside imperial forces to arrive in the region, in the 1850s, were Muslim traders and raiders from the north, with whom some of the Zande kings collaborated while trying to preserve autonomy. European colonizers came shortly thereafter, at the turn of the twentieth century, and claimed authority and jurisdiction. Some Azande lived under French rule in Oubangui-Chari (now the CAR); others lived under the Belgians (now the DRC); and others—including those Evans-Pritchard got to know for his research—under the British in what is now South Sudan. Life in these different remote imperial corners varied. For example, French officials in the predominantly Zande town of Obo (CAR) in the early 1920s lamented that their “natives” kept fleeing to the Belgian Congo, whose government, in contrast to the French, provided some basic medical aid for sleeping sickness. But, especially with the benefit of being able to look across a whole century of elapsed time, it is the similarities that are most striking. In particular, conflict and flight have been important fixtures of many Zande people’s lives, especially in recent decades. As Braak points out in this issue, the First and Second Sudanese Civil Wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005, respectively) resulted in large numbers of Sudanese Azande seeking refuge in neighboring regions and beyond. More recently, over the past two decades, it is Azande from the CAR and the DRC who have been in flight, due to the Simba Rebellion (DRC) and the Lord’s Resistance Army, a brutal armed group that the Ugandan military pushed out beyond its borders into the DRC and CAR. Many such refugees have settled in South Sudan, which itself has seen renewed war after gaining statehood in 2011, including war in the country’s Azande-majority southwestern corner. The conflict-related displacement within Zandeland has strengthened the kinship networks and sense of fellowship among Azande (Hillary 2021), but it has also revealed divides among them based on differing national experiences. Another shared experience throughout the region over the past century has been the increasing role played by Christian, and lately Evangelical, churches.

The articles in this special section each provide further crucial historical and contemporary context for un-

derstanding Zande social life. Alongside Evangelical churches, there have also been recent efforts to revive Zande traditions and institutions, most prominently the kingship. The new kingdom is fundamentally different from the precolonial era of Zande royalty, when there was no overarching sense of Zandeness, and instead there was a region where Zande speakers lived under a number of rulers,³ and in social positions loosely stratified according to clan.

An overview of the collection

This collection includes research articles in a few different styles, as well as one photo essay. Our goal has been to draw out a variety of aspects of Zande life today and the changing but persistent value of Evans-Pritchard’s original ethnography. Including a range of rhetorical styles best let us do that. One contribution, by Peter Gerschiere, steps back from Zande life to reflect on the tension between ethnographers’ desire to tell a coherent and consistent story about how witchcraft works—which Evans-Pritchard did so compellingly—and the empirical reality they encounter when studying witchcraft, which is full of uncertainty and competing and even inconsistent explanations from the people dealing with its effects. “Maybe,” he concludes, “we have to accept that trying to impose a final solution in theoretical terms risks killing the subject in all its elusive and kaleidoscopic qualities.” That proposition might not please the philosophers, with their love of arriving at truth via reduction, but it nourishes anthropologists, for whom reduction falls somewhere between inaccuracy and sacrilege.

The other contributions depict vivid scenes of Zande life over the past century, and particularly the dilemmas and innovations Zande people have been working through recently. In his article, Isaac Waanzi Hillary provides a detailed account of the instatement of the Azande Kingdom, drawing from his attendance at the coronation of the new king, Atoroba Peni Rikito, in 2022. He uses that seminal event as an opening to delve into Zande history

3. Evans-Pritchard used the term “kings,” while both the Anglo-Egyptian and French colonial authorities referred to them mostly as “chiefs” or “sultans,” perhaps to diminish their stature or because by the time they arrived the Zande leaders were doing extensive business with the Muslim raiding polities based to their north (see, e.g., de Dampierre 1983.)



since the death of the earlier Avongara king, Gbudue, in 1905. At the height of the Zande expansion, the period Evans-Pritchard evoked in his work, there were several interconnected, yet substantially autonomous, Zande kingdoms. Clans were an important social institution, and the Avongara clan was dominant and revered. Gbudue refused to collaborate with the British, and he died under somewhat disputed circumstances due to that refusal. Sudan gained independence in 1955 and South Sudan in 2011. The Zande leader in 2011, when South Sudan became independent, Paramount Chief Wilson Peni, initially took a course similar to Gbudue's. He estranged himself from the government by criticizing ruling party corruption. He was rewarded with arrest, imprisonment, and exile to the capital, Juba, far from his home in the Zande regions of the country's southwest. His coronation in 2022 became possible because he switched to another long-standing political tactic in the region, namely to formally declare oneself to not be a threat to a more powerful neighbor in order to gain greater room for maneuver locally (see Lombard 2020 for more examples, from the late nineteenth century to the present). One of the main differences between his kingship and those of the past is that he is the only king. Another key difference is that Zande people are currently resident in three nation-states. How far does the king's power extend? In South Sudan, people understand the king's power to be born in part from his ancestral connections, and in part because he has stepped back from challenging the ruling party, but how that domestic tractability will translate into relations with Azande outside of South Sudan, who are also mobilizing politically, remains to be seen.

Lotje de Vries and Mareike Schomerus enlarge the picture of the Zande region by contrasting Zande history and political life on either side of the CAR/South Sudan border. During the colonial era, the French in Oubangui-Chari (now the CAR) were impoverished, neglectful, and intermittently brutal, but they successfully transformed Zande leaders into administrative chiefs whose role was to carry out directives from the capital. The more deeply rooted sources of their legitimacy and social importance were dug out. Such was not the case in the British-run colony that eventually became South Sudan, where Zande people continued to recount tales of King Gbudue's prowess and resistance. This is one reason why South Sudanese Azande today have been so much more eager to see a king reinstated, while that has not been discussed in the CAR. Azande on both sides of the border have had to deal with armed conflict,

including the depredations of the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and military interventions aimed at countering that group, but they have also been mistrustful or critical of their counterparts across the border. The rise of a Zande armed group in the CAR, the Azande Ani Kpi Gbe (AAKG) is a development to watch in this respect.

Ferenc Dávid Markó and Bruno Braak, in their respective articles, both describe the transformations in witchcraft and its adjudication in South Sudanese Zandeland. Markó tells us that the chief oracular practice described by Evans-Pritchard, the *benge* oracle, ended around the 1990s, because violent conflict in the Congo made the journey there to gather the requisite poison impossible. To fill some of the gap left by *benge*'s absence, Zande have adopted the oracular practice known as *dabaya*, initially developed by a neighboring ethnic group, the Bongo. *Dabaya* entails the careful slaughter of chickens and observation of the positioning of their corpses, and especially their necks, once they expire. Markó posits that the need for oracles increases during upheaval and violence, which Zande people have seen a lot of in recent decades. Bruno Braak notes that *mangu*, which Evans-Pritchard translated (imperfectly, by his own admission) as witchcraft, has disappeared, but *ngua* (occultly charged medicines) have proliferated. Whereas *mangu* was used solely to do harm, today's *ngua* can include rituals and medicine used for everything from self-protection to malevolent pillaging and attacking.

Evans-Pritchard's book had described a way of Zande life prior to the advent of formal courts. British colonizers attempted to refuse to hear witchcraft allegations, arguing that since witchcraft does not exist, it cannot be tried as a crime, though in practice they sometimes breached this position for practical reasons (Fields 1982; Leonardi 2007). Today, witchcraft cases are commonly heard in South Sudan's customary courts. They are often brought by people accused of witchcraft, who see the courts as their best hope for an adjudicative process not overtaken by emotion, and a justice not dealt primarily through violence. Churches—including Catholic, mainline Protestant, and Evangelical—also try to expand their influence through involvement in dealing with witchcraft-related misfortune, and so do the staffers of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan.

The UN mission is mandated to uphold human rights ideals in South Sudan, but its staffers have struggled to do so. Instead, the South Sudanese government has become known for predation and corruption on a



vast scale. While everyone in South Sudan is aware of government officials' malfeasance, speaking about it directly is fraught. The security services have eyes and ears everywhere, and while the effects of government predation are easily felt and observed, the precise modalities of enrichment are not always equally transparent. Joshua Craze explains that given the public secret of predation, witchcraft explanations have become all the more important, because they are a way of turning the predatory and self-enriching behavior of elites into stories that make sense—into “stories that work,” to borrow Luise White's phrasing from her seminal study of zombie rumors in colonial southern Africa (2000). There is a cost to translating the realm of formal politics through the language and practice of witchcraft, however: the malfeasance becomes a domestic, private affair, such that the generalized, structural conditions through which it is produced are hidden from critique.

One theme in all the articles in this collection is the intertwining of Zande tendencies to reach out and adapt to changing dynamics of modern life while also striving to retain and remake traditions and long-standing rituals and values. One form that interest in tradition and craft takes is the making of slit drums. Long before North Americans were communicating long-distance via telegraph, Azande were rapidly sending detailed messages across tens if not hundreds of kilometers, and they did so via slit drums nearly as large as a person, known as *gugu*. Each slit drum has an opening with a varying width, such that hitting it at points in the aperture creates different tones. Since the area's languages are tonal, it becomes possible to reproduce the tonal patterns of words and sentences (though not the phonemic sounds) in specially attuned ways and possible for hearers in the neighboring villages to recognize them. Zoe Cormack's photo essay documents the making of a slit drum in Western Equatoria State between 2021 and 2023. While the drums are still used—mostly in Christian calls to prayer—it has become much harder to make them. Some of the giant trees that make the best *gugu* are hard to find, and few have honed the incredible skill that goes into making them. Added to that, while many appreciate hearing the drums at dances and religious ceremonies, there are few people today who can speak and understand drum languages. Elia, the drummer at work in the photo essay, has not yet found anyone to teach his craft. His son was killed in the war, and his nephews are townies uninterested in rural, old-fashioned skills. Even Elia speaks/plays the drum language with some halting

moments. Perhaps through his work and its documentation he will find eager apprentices.

Conclusion

The ostensibly traditional matters of witchcraft, magic, oracles, and kingship have transformed but endured across a stormy century in Central Africa. The new kingship is the clearest example of how a “traditional” affair was re-created with support of a global Zande diaspora and the central government in Juba. It takes form through Facebook-livestreamed “state of the union” addresses and animated WhatsApp chat groups. Zande people in South Sudan overwhelmingly support the new kingdom, even though they know the new kingdom will not be like its precolonial predecessors, and even though its form and function remain contested.

It is unfortunate when people read Evans-Pritchard's abridged ethnography on Zande witchcraft that they see it as a portrait of an idiosyncratic belief system while missing his wider points about knowledge, language, and power. As Beidelman pointed out, witchcraft “enables some Zande to dominate others, men over women, elders over juniors, and the rich and princely over commoners. Evans-Pritchard also points out how subterfuge and hypocrisy are at times employed to perpetuate this system of domination” (2003: 594). Zande life is stratified, and witchcraft and the kingship are important to elaborating the terms of that stratification. Yet Zande people today also see witchcraft and a revived kingdom as a source of leverage and agency, a means for challenging divisions of political and economic power, and a way of transforming present frustrations into a different future. These neotraditional practices and beliefs connect the present to precolonial times, and isolated towns like Yambio and Obo to global diasporas. Witchcraft and royalty support and explain stratification, yet also promise more popularized access to power and means of accountability. These ephemeral, sometimes troubling, hopes have helped to make tradition such an important, and malleable, resource for Azande as they have traversed a tumultuous century and in their efforts to build for the future.

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