WITCHCRAFT SUBSTANCE AND 'ZANDE LOGIC'

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ABSTRACT

In this article I first review recent discussions of the relation between the African Zande logic and Aristotelian logic. Using evidence from Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* and new ethnographic data, I argue that Zande thought about witchcraft substance is not contradictory and so does not present a different, non-Western logic. In the latter part of the paper I reconfigure the problem in terms of 'practical logic', as outlined by Pierre Bourdieu. I argue, ultimately, that stated Zande ideas about witchcraft do not form an abstract and coherent theory, but constitute a set of 'fluid' beliefs that are deployed pragmatically according to the context. The whole question of contradictory argument, therefore, is irrelevant.

Introduction

Certain beliefs found in non-western societies have come to be at the centre of sophisticated philosophical reflections on the nature of logic, metaphoric language, rationality and human knowledge. Thus we have the Nuer twins who are considered to be birds and the Bororo who call themselves red parrots.[1] On a par with these are the Zande notions of witchcraft substance and its inheritance, described in Evans-Pritchard's (1937) classic, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. The Zande material has recently triggered a discussion on systems of logic in *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, (Triplett 1988, Jennings 1989, Keita 1993), one that reopens an earlier debate published in *Man* (Cooper 1975; Kenny et al. 1976; Salmon 1978; cf. also Evens 1983; Zeitlyn 1983).

The basic argument as it was laid out by Evans-Pritchard, and which will be spelled out below, is that the African Zande believed most personal misfortunes to be due to the action of witches, who were identified by consulting oracles. Witches possessed a witchcraft substance in their belly, the presence of which could be revealed by autopsy. This substance (*mangu*) was considered to be inherited by sons from their father witches and by daughters from their mother witches. Since all members of a clan are related to one another through common descent in the male line, Evans-Pritchard argued that if a man was proven a witch by post-mortem search, "the whole of his clan are *ipso facto* witches" (1937:24). This would be the logical conclusion, so he claimed, but the Zande considered no clan to consist entirely of witches; the Zande "see the sense of this argument but they do not accept its conclusions" (ibid.). In the same vein Evans-Pritchard noted a second contradiction, i.e. a logical conclusion that the Zande did not accept: "if a man be found by post-mortem immune from witchcraft-substance all his clan must also be immune" (ibid.). These apparent incongruities have prompted anthropologists and philosophers to ponder if, and to what extent, the Zande employ an alternative (non-western) logic.[2]

The purpose of this article is twofold: (I) to attempt a logical reformulation of the witchcraft argument which incorporates all the available ethnographic material and corrects flaws in previous reconstructions, and (II) to propose a practice-oriented interpretation of 'Zande logic' that reveals the leap made when moving from pragmatic designations of witchhood in particular contexts to a systematic theory of *mangu* and its inheritability. Practical reasoning is more fluid, more fuzzy, than theory building, and the use of vague, loose, ambiguous concepts and 'hedges' (Lakoff 1987; McCawley 1993) allows social actors to promote their various perspectives and interests (Bourdieu 1977, 1990).

I Zande logic among anthropologists and philosophers

An ongoing discussion

This section recounts the pendular movement between defenders and critics of a non-western logic for the Zande. Cooper (1975), Bloor (1976) and Jennings (1989) believe there is reason to argue for a different logic, while Salmon (1978), Triplett (1988) and Keita (1993) try to show the contrary.

Cooper (1975:245) reconstructs Evans-Pritchard's (1937) account of witchhood and witchcraft substance as follows:

> (1) Every biological relative of a witch is a witch.
> (2) If (1) then all Zande are witches (since they are all related).
> (3) Not all Zande are witches (by the post-mortem test).

This argument consitutes a logical anomaly in Aristotelian logic: A, if A then B, not B. Yet the inconsistency is not real, according to the author, because magico-religious thought incorporates non-standard many-valued logic of the type used for dissolving anomalies of quantum mechanics. By employing Lukasiewicz's three-valued logic, in which propositions can be true, false, or indeterminate, the Zande avoid the apparent contradiction. In Cooper's view, proposition (1) is neither false nor true, but considered by the Zande as "an *in principle* untestable proposition which is consequently assigned the truth-value indeterminate" -- and the contradiction disappears (1975:245).[3]

Apart from the fact that the argument's reconstruction is far from accurate (not one of Cooper's propositions can be found as such in Evans-Pritchard's book), the relevance of the quantum situation to the Zande example is dubious at best. Contrary to the untestability in principle of indeterminate statements in quantum physics, premise (1) is "not directly testable", which is not the same (Salmon 1978:447). Instead, Salmon argues, the Zande reject (1) as false on two grounds, as reported by Evans-Pritchard (1937:24-5): first, the heritability of witchcraft substance is restricted to close kinsmen only, and second, even though someone has witchcraft substance, it may remain inoperative. So witchcraft substance is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of witchhood, and "[t]here is no contradiction when the standards of ordinary two-valued logic are employed" (Salmon 1978:452).

The recent contributions by Triplett, Jennings and Keita have their point of departure in Bloor's (1976) 'strong programme in the sociology of knowledge'. In this book Bloor claims that the Zande material provides a case for logical relativism, insofar as social institutions and laws compell people to draw certain logical conclusions (that seem 'natural') and not others. While the Zande "have the same psychology as us", they have "radically different institutions" -- such as oracle consultation and witchcraft accusation (Bloor 1991:145). These institutions are related to a Zande, culture-specific logic; it is this logic that differs from ours.

Bloor takes issue with two central ideas in Evans-Pritchard's analysis: first, that there is only one logic, and second, that logic is able to threaten social institutions (respectively the uniqueness of logic and the potency of logic). Following John Stuart Mill's theory of mathematics and logic, Bloor argues, on the contrary, that institutional beliefs are stable and cannot be called into question by logical inferences. For instance, the Zande take it for granted that all male members of a clan cannot be witches:

> On this view it is therefore logical not to draw this conclusion. But since it is the logical one for us to draw there must be more than one logic: an Azande logic and a Western logic. (Bloor 1991:139)

It is this inference that Triplett rejects; according to him, "the Azande's logic is in fact impeccably Aristotelian" (1988:361). Triplett constructs two versions of the argument, as it is not clear to him what the relation is between being a witch and possessing the substance:

A (4) Every witch has witchcraft substance.
(5) Witchcraft substance is always inherited by the same-sexed children of a witch.
(6) The Zande clan is a group of persons related biologically to one another through the male line.
(7) Man A of clan C is a witch.
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(8) Every man in clan C is a witch;
and

B (4') Every witch has witchcraft substance, and everyone with witchcraft substance is a witch.
(5) through (8) same as A.[4]

In the weaker case A, writes Triplett, the Zande are justified in rejecting conclusion (8), for the possession of witchcraft substance does not necessarily make one a witch (see also Salmon 1978). In case B, on the contrary, there seems to be a contradiction. Yet when confronted with this inconsistency, the Zande resist conclusion (8) not by embracing an alternative logic, but by revising their premises. According to the author, they abandon premise (4') and add the proviso that witchcraft substance may sometimes be inactive.

This idea of Triplett -- that the Zande change their premises when they have their attention drawn to the contradictory implications of the argument by a Westerner -- forms an easy target for Jennings (1989). Indeed, nowhere in Evans-Pritchard's monograph is it

suggested that the Zande *alter* their beliefs in light of the contradiction so as to make them consistent in the Aristotelian sense. Instead, the Zande do not revise their beliefs, "and so, in this respect, their logic differs from ours" (1989:282). Jennings also rejects Triplett's version A of the argument because its premise (4) results from a confusion about the relation between being a witch and having witchcraft substance -- an equivalence that "would be clear from reading Evans-Pritchard" (1989:279).

Unlike Jennings, however, Keita (1993) does not find any evidence in Evans-Pritchard for an equivalence between these two. On the contrary, the anthropologist's account supports the claim that inheriting witchcraft substance does not automatically lead to the possession of active witchcraft faculties. Witchhood is dealt with on a case-by-case basis, as he reported:

> In point of fact, therefore, Azande generally regard witchcraft as an individual trait and it is treated as such in spite of its association with kinship. (Evans-Pritchard 1937:25)

For Keita, Triplett is correct with his weaker formulation (A) of the argument, there is no contradiction in Zande beliefs, Evans-Pritchard, Bloor, and Jennings are at fault in their analysis of Zande logic, and the plea of the latter two for a non-western logic is groundless.

Yet even if it *were* the case that the Zande reason contradictorily on the issue of witchcraft substance, Keita argues that this would still not entail the existence of incompatible logics, because "similar instances of contradictory thinking could be found in the West" (1993:151). The author cites the examples of race classification in the United States and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Christianity.[5] Thus, while Keita rejects the idea of western and Zande logics, he joins Bloor's position in entertaining the possibility of a non-orthodox logic for beliefs that are institutionally grounded. We will briefly return to this point in the conclusion.

Translation problems and ethnographic data

A major difficulty of which the authors discussed above seem unaware, is a semantic problem. The terms 'witchcraft substance' and 'witch' do not have unequivocal equivalents in the Zande language. The corresponding terms, '*mangu*' on the one hand, and '*boro mangu*' or '*ira mangu*' on the other, have more than one meaning. Evans-Pritchard (1937:9) noted three meanings for the word '*mangu*': 'witchcraft' (the psychic phenomenon), 'witchcraft-substance' (the physical substance in witches), and 'witchcraft-phlegm'. The latter designates a substance the *binza*, or so-called witch-doctors, possessed in their belly and which enabled them to divine through dancing. These diviners were called upon to make prophecies and identify witches. A diviner acquired *mangu* in the course of his training by taking medicines and swallowing what his teacher expectorated from his own 'phlegm'.

While Evans-Pritchard gave three meanings of '*mangu*', he translated '*boro mangu*' and '*ira mangu*' in one way only, as 'witch': "a person whose body contains, or is declared by oracles or diviners to contain, witchcraft-substance *and* who is supposed to practice

witchcraft" (1937:9; emphasis added).[6] Yet these terms literally mean 'man of *mangu*' and 'owner of *mangu*' (respectively). By favouring one reading, Evans-Pritchard precluded the possibility of understanding '*ira mangu*' as 'possessor of witchcraft-phlegm', which it also means.

The Zande themselves were ambiguous about the relationship between the *binza*'s and the witch's substance. As might be expected, it was the diviners who emphasized their difference:

> If you question a witch-doctor on this point he will explain to you that the witchcraft of witches is one thing and the witchcraft of witch-doctors another thing. The latter is an analogous substance to the former, but one is a product of medicine, the other an hereditary physical trait. The one is directed to the protection and healing of mankind, the other is intent upon their destruction. (Evans-Pritchard 1937:225)

The majority of the Zande, however, those who did not belong to the diviners' corporation, were of another opinion:

> The layman is not entirely convinced by this subtle distinction and prefers to state plainly that it is ordinary *mangu* in their own bellies which enables successful practitioners to see it in the bellies of others. [...] I have many times heard people openly say that successful witch-doctors are witches. (ibid.:187)

Today, the Zande of the Central African Republic say exactly the same thing about their past diviners: How could the *binza* otherwise have known the witches if they were not witches themselves? But they add that the diviners normally did not use their *mangu* as witches do. In Zaire, where these diviners still exist, their initiation has recently been observed by Prinz (n.d.). The climax of the initiation ritual is the charging of the novice's 'witch-power organ' by swallowing the flames of a burning straw. This is called *ka ginda we*, to kindle a fire. It should be recalled that the Zande described witchcraft to Evans-Pritchard as a fireball-like substance: "Witchcraft is like fire, it lights a light" (1937:34).

While witchcraft is no longer a major issue among the Zande of the Central African Republic (contrary to sorcery, i.e. the use of material substances and spells for anti-social purposes), I learned that, today, witch's witchcraft substance may be purchased. An owner of witchcraft gets into a stream and his client positions himself downstream. The glowing *mangu* is spit out in the water and swallowed by the buyer. In this way a witch may even rid himself of his substance altogether. So *mangu* substance can enter a person artificially. Most likely harmful witchcraft substance was not a commodity in the past, yet diviners did indeed acquire *mangu* in ways other than inheritance.

The data on Zande diviners presented by Evans-Pritchard together with the more recent material suggest two things. First, *mangu* substance need not be inherited but may be acquired; and second, the possession of *mangu* does not necessarily make one a (malevolent) witch. We can now reconsider the argument on witchcraft and substance inheritability.

The argument reformulated

All the reconstructions offered so far -- including Evans-Pritchard's -- conflate a number of issues. Underlying the discussion outlined above is the following set of propositions, whose truth-values are to be examined before giving a verdict on the argument as a whole:

(9) If person P is a witch, then P possesses witchcraft substance.
(10) If person P possesses witchcraft substance as shown by autopsy, then P was a witch.
(11) If person P is born free from witchcraft substance, then P will never possess it.
(12) If person P acts like a witch in a particular case of misfortune according to the oracle, then P is a witch.
(13) If person P posseses witchcraft substance, then P is a witch.

Proposition (9) is true, the only problem being the Zande terms and their translation. (10) may also be considered true; yet it should be remembered that autopsy was *only* performed in the context of witchcraft suspicion and accusation (see below). The question whether the Zande thought diviners' *mangu* could also be diagnosed by post-mortem search has, I think, to be answered in the negative, although there is no direct evidence to answer it.

Propositions (11) through (13) are less straightforward. As we have seen above, *mangu* can be acquired, either in the case of diviners or in the case of people who wish to become witches. Therefore (11) is untrue.

There is evidence to suggest that (12) is not true either. The Zande did not think of witches in terms of 'once a thief, always a thief', but rather: 'one swallow does not a spring make'. It was only after someone's name had come out from the oracle repeatedly that people would begin to think of him as a witch. Moreover, as Evans-Pritchard wrote in his Chapter 'Are Witches Conscious Agents?':

> [N]o one is interested in the question whether a man is a witch or not. To a Zande this appears *an entirely theoretical question* and one about which he has not informed himself. What he wants to know is whether a certain man is injuring him in a particular situation at a particular time. Hence the doctrine of hereditary witchcraft probably has little influence towards indicating to a man his possession of witchcraft. [...] The real question is rather whether a man's witchcraft is cool towards you or whether it is impelled by jealousy against you. (1937:127; emphasis added)

These remarks further support the claim that neither witch essence nor substance inheritance were issues for the Zande. More will be said on the issue of "an entirely theoretical question" in part II.

Proposition (13), the inverse of (9), is of course the second part of proposition (4') in Triplett's account. Evans-Pritchard reported cases where an autopsy performed on a man's son revealed the substance and made the people say: "In truth you *are* witches for we have seen your witchcraft-substance" (1937:44; emphasis added). This would appear to prove the correctness of (13), yet in all these cases it concerned men already repeatedly accused of

witchcraft. In other words, the presence of the substance confirmed the fact that witches possess *mangu*, rather than establish that somebody was a witch. All the evidence convinces me that the Zande did not consider witchcraft substance *alone* a sufficient condition for witchhood; there is no equivalence between possession of *mangu* and being a witch (see also note 6).

Taking into account what precedes, I reformulate the non-contradictory argument as follows:

(14) Every witch possesses *mangu* (substance) but not everyone with the substance is a witch.
(15) Witchcraft substance is usually inherited by the same-sexed children of a witch, but it may also be acquired (or lost); besides, witchcraft substance can remain inactive.
(16) A clan is a group of persons related to one another through common descent in the male line.
(17) Man A belongs to clan C.
(18) Man A, suspected of being a witch, possesses witchcraft substance as shown by autopsy.
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(19) Man A was a witch, and all male members of clan C need not be witches.

The second conclusion which Evans-Pritchard drew and the Zande refused to accept, was that an entire clan would be witch-proof if one of its members was cleared by post-mortem examination. It will be verified that the possibility of acquiring or losing witchcraft substance equally invalidates the charge of this being contradictory.

In sum, the Zande logic is not contradictory in the Aristotelian sense. Let us move, then, from an exclusive concern with formal logic to a more ethnographic concern with 'practical logic'.

II 'Zande logic' in perspective

> No doubt because they know and recognize no other thought than the thought of the 'thinker', [...] anthropologists have never known how to rescue the people they were studying from the barbarism of pre-logic except by identifying them with the most prestigious of their colleagues -- logicians or philosophers. (Bourdieu 1990:37)

Comparative logic and rationality

First of all, I should like to call attention to the titles of Triplett's (1988) and Jennings' (1989) articles, with their use of the terms 'Western logic' and 'Zande logic'. The former designates a complex body of symbols, rules and practices that has been formed over the course of centuries in literate societies; 'Zande logic', contrariwise, refers to a set of "collective thought patterns" (Jennings 1989:285) that were described by a single author who spent 20 months among a few hundred people in the southern Sudan during the late 1920s. The use of such labels in the kind of comparison endeavoured by these authors is ill-founded,

it seems to me.[7] Yet this is more than a question of labels only, since the labels establish the possibility of comparison: we stop thinking about Zande witchcraft claims proper and begin to presuppose that at issue is 'Zande logic'.

This is not to say that questions of comparative logic did not preoccupy Evans-Pritchard. At the time, the work of the French philosopher Lévy-Bruhl had a major influence on his thinking and writing. Without it, as he later confessed, he could not have written his monograph on the Zande, "or even made the observations on which it is based" (Evans-Pritchard 1976:241). In his (1910) book and subsequent writings, Lévy-Bruhl undertook a comparative study of mentalities. He hypothesised a 'primitive mentality' among 'primitive peoples', related to their social institutions and characterized by mystical perception and pre-logical thought (unbound by the principles of identity, non-contradiction and the excluded third).

While Evans-Pritchard was sympathetic to some of Lévy-Bruhl's ideas, he criticised the Frenchman especially for (i) representing primitive thought more mystical than it really was, and (ii) considering primitive peoples to be impermeable to experience (Evans-Pritchard 1934; see also Horton and Finnegan 1973). He showed, instead, that "the Zande mind is logical and inquiring within the framework of its culture", that their perception "is as clear as our own", and that "[s]cepticism, far from being smothered, is recognized, even inculcated" (1937:42, 72 and 475). Evans-Pritchard further objected to Levy-Bruhl's terminology and refrained from using the terms 'pre-logical' and 'illogical' in his monograph.[8] His whole discussion of witchcraft inheritability and the apparent contradictions must be seen in light of this debate with Lévy-Bruhl. It is thus a little ironic that a radically different 'Zande logic' is endorsed by authors who base their theories on Evans-Pritchard's ethnography and seem unaware of this broader context.

The inheritance of Zande witchcraft substance also features in a polemic about the question as to whether different cultures have a different rationality (rather than logic). The question appeared in the discussion of how one goes about understanding another culture's beliefs.[9] The best-known protagonist of the plural standards of rationality thesis is Winch. He claims that, for the Zande, there is no contradiction in their witchcraft beliefs because such a contradiction only appears in the context of our scientific culture which differs from the context in which these beliefs operate:

> Zande notions of witchcraft do not constitute a theoretical system in terms of which Azande try to gain a quasi-theoretical understanding of the world. [...] I have *not* said that Azande conceptions of witchcraft have nothing to do with understanding the world at all. The point is that a different form of the concept of understanding is involved here. (Winch 1964:315)

The kind of understanding Winch has in mind is one that "involves recognition that one's life is subject to contingencies, rather than an attempt to control these" (ibid.:321). According to him, notions of witchcraft do not form a theory, but reveal a drama about social relations and their disruptions. In short then, Winch blames Evans-Pritchard for making a category mistake by "pressing Zande thought where it would not naturally go -- to a contradiction" (ibid.:315).

Winch's interpretations on this point have been challenged from two sides, both by critics of his Wittgensteinian stance and by authors more sympathetic to his epistemological pluralism. Horton (1976), who belongs to the former, defends the idea that Zande 'mystical thought', like science, is geared to explanation, prediction and control of events. Even if their interest in the subject of witchcraft is applied rather than pure, Horton argues, the Zande still advance theories about misfortunes. Nor does the presence of inconsistency make these beliefs any different from theoretical propositions in the sciences, for scientists too are tolerant of apparent contradictions in a promising theory (Horton 1976:171).

Taylor (1982), who stands for the second kind of critic, also takes issue with Winch's argument: even if the Zande are not interested in building a theoretical understanding of the world, he argues, they are interested in finding out who is (i.e., acts like) a witch -- "and it is this which would seem to be threatened if the criteria were to yield contradictory results" (1982:88-9). Yet unlike Horton, Taylor does not draw a close parallel between Zande beliefs and scientific theories. On the contrary, the reason that Zande beliefs are not threatened by the apparent contradiction is due to the difference between these two:

> [This] is perhaps the crucial difference between Zande society and ours: we have this activity of theoretical understanding which seems to have no counterpart among them. (Taylor 1982:89)

The author defines theoretical understanding in terms of 'perspicuous articulation' and 'contemplation from a disengaged perspective'. It is this line of thought -- rather than Taylor's own argument on judgements between incommensurable activities -- that I wish to pursue further. Much, indeed, seems to hinge upon what exactly is meant by 'theoretical' in Evans-Pritchard's claim that the Zande did not perceive contradictions as he did, "because they have no theoretical interest in the subject" (1937:25), and in subsequent uses of the term by Winch, Horton, and Taylor.

Practical vs. theoretical interest

Let me begin with an example of a 'contradictory' set of beliefs from the West:

(20) Every American who works hard and is really determined can become rich.
(21) If (20) then all Americans can become rich (since all can work hard and be really determined).
(22) Not all Americans can become rich (since the existing organisation of labour demands that some people do menial jobs).[10]

The argument has been intentionally cast in the form of Cooper's (1975) reconstruction: A, if A then B, not B. Yet no more than Cooper's does this one require a three-valued logic to be true or even to make sense. Most of the time, people do not reason from a total and disengaged perspective, yet it is precisely from such a theoretical point of view on the social structure that proposition (22) can be made, thereby contradicting (20) and (21).

Evans-Pritchard suggested something along these lines when he noted that it was because the Zande "do not pool their ritual experiences", "nor pool their information [on magic and witchcraft]", that contradictions were not noticed (1937:476, 28). This pooling is what Bourdieu calls "the privilege of totalization" of the ethnographer, who accumulates information "which is not and cannot always be mastered by any single informant [...] because the necessities of existence never require this sort of synoptic apprehension" (Bourdieu 1977:106).[11] And one should be careful, Bourdieu adds elsewhere, not to attribute to a gap between 'cultures' or 'mentalities' what is in fact an effect of "the gulf between two relations to the world, one theoretical, the other practical" (Bourdieu 1990:14).

Bourdieu illustrates his theory of practice in a study of the (Algerian) Kabyle calendar. Noting numerous 'contradictions' in terminology and temporal divisions between various accounts -- "identical periods are given different names, and still more often, identical names cover periods varying considerably" -- he explains these inconsistencies as the product of the ethnographer's objectivist approach to what is an essentially practical issue (Bourdieu 1977:98). Contrary to the inquirer's disengaged disposition, Kabyle people, as socially characterized agents, have various practical interests in dividing up the year in such-and-such a way. None of them is bothered about incongruities that appear only in some abstract calendar. The latter simply does not exist in Kabyle society: this "synoptic illusion" is a construction created by the investigation (1977:97).[12]

Bourdieu's theory of practice, then, is at once an analysis (1) of practical practice and (2) of theoretical practice. Applied to the Zande case, we have: (1) the Zande practice of identifying a witch in a particular case of misfortune, originating from a *practical interest* which precludes any concern about a general theory of witchhood inheritance and clans, and (2) the anthropologist's practice of asking questions about these matters, with a *theoretical interest* in laying bare Zande "natural philosophy" (Evans-Pritchard 1937:63). The latter resulted in a 'contradictory' account, as in the case of the Kabyle calendar, and more questioning yielded 'quasi-theoretical' explanations of *mangu* and the mechanics of its inheritance.

These explanations were not invented on the spot to counter charges of contradictory thought, of course, but picked from an available stock of answers. One should note, however, that explanations were mobilized differently by various actors in particular contexts. Evans-Pritchard related in some detail how Zande had different conceptions of witchcraft substance and its workings, depending on whether they were diviners or laymen (see above), commoners or princes, accusing or being accused (e.g. 1937:25, 32, 119f., 187, 225). For instance, Zande insisted upon volition in cases where others were accused of witchcraft, but denied it in their own case; and commoners never accused princes of witchcraft, because the principle was that princes were not witches -- although princes themselves sometimes accused their royal peers. These various perspectives are systematically left out from accounts on 'Zande logic', which present a uniform, essentialized and synoptic construct of their 'mystical thought'. Yet as Evans-Pritchard himself acknowledged:

> Zande doctrines are so numerous, varied, and plastic that a man can always find in them an element to serve his interests in any given situation. (Evans-Pritchard 1937:133)

And although he noted this, the British anthropologist did not see all its implications for social analysis but seems to have remained committed to a single perspective.

Conclusion

According to Lienhardt, a student of Evans-Pritchard's, the task of anthropology is best understood as intercultural translation, in order "[to make] the coherence primitive thought has in the language it really lives in, as clear as possible in our own" (Lienhardt 1956:97). Gellner (1962) criticises this brand of anthropology for endeavouring, at all costs, to make sense of alien concepts and beliefs by contextualising them. Instead of a tolerance-engendering contextual interpretation leading to "excessive charity" and coherence, he advocates a critical look at the logic of alien religious discourse in order to be able to bring to the fore the absurdity and incoherence of its concepts.

On the face of it, my paper seems paradigmatic for Gellner's double argument. The first part of the paper would correspond to an attempt by the excessively charitable anthropologist to contextualise Zande beliefs in witchcraft so as to show their non-contradictory nature -- while the second part would be more in line with Gellner's own position by emphasising the lack of coherence of these beliefs. This reading would be mistaken, however, and my argument constitutes a critique of Gellner (1962). As has been pointed out before, Gellner's account of the anthropologist-translator reduces the interpretation of concepts and assertations to a mere "abstract matching of two sets of sentences" (Asad 1986:151). This is inadequate on two counts: first, because it leaves out the entire question of the social practice in which both speaking and understanding are rooted, and second, because it obliterates what Asad calls the "inequality of languages" involved in the translation process (1986:156ff.) -- not only in the sense of, say, English versus Zande, but also in the sense of a Western academic genre versus the life-style in an African village.

Whereas Gellner's (1962) plea for incoherence is limited to the ideational level of concepts and stated discourse, my own argument situates 'incoherence' at the pragmatic level of interests and strategies. Moreover, an "inequality of languages" also exists between theoretical language and practical speech. By 'translating' practical statements into a system of thought (whether made coherent or not), one moves from scaler fuzziness, characteristic of reasoning in context, to conceptual discontinuity presupposed in theoretical propositions.

The misleading idea that Zande beliefs constitute a "natural philosophy" and an "intellectually coherent system", was suggested by Evans-Pritchard (1937:63, 475), but it is especially philosophers who have put Zande thought on a par with Western science, in order to argue for their similarity or their difference. The disagreement between these two has been presented as an opposition between the objectivist and the subjectivist (or emotivist) interpretations of witchcraft beliefs (eg. Cook 1983). 'Objectivists' (like Horton) argue that to say "X is a witch" is equivalent to the statement "X is a leper", whereas according to subjectivists (like Winch), "X is a witch" is akin to "X is 'it'", as in a game of tag.

This paper does not support either objectivist or subjectivist views.[13] In the first part of this paper I argued that Zande thought on the matter of witchcraft substance and its inheritance is not contradictory. In the second part I tried to indicate a different approach to the issue altogether, one that focuses on diverse practices and their logic. From the latter point of view, questions of incoherence and anomalies at the level of articulated propositions do not arise. This is due to the difference between theoretical logic and practical logic, *not* to an alleged difference between Western logic and 'Zande logic', *nor* to the opposition between scientific rationality and 'primitive reasoning'.[14]

Bloor's (1976) and Keita's (1993) argument for a non-western or non-orthodox logic (respectively) can now be reinterpreted within the framework offered by a logic of practice. The authors relate these kinds of logic to beliefs that are institutionally grounded. Another way of putting it, however, is to see such beliefs as resulting from practical interests that vary according to the situation and the actors involved. 'Diviners are but witches', 'princes cannot be witches', 'witchcraft substance remains inoperative' -- these and similar beliefs are sometimes held, but in other contexts their opposites may be equally held. This does not entail logical relativism, however. It only indicates the practical disposition in the ordinary use of these concepts: witchcraft beliefs are not an object of thought, "predisposed to become an object of discourse and to be unfolded as a totality existing beyond [their] 'applications' and independently of the needs and interests of [their] users" (Bourdieu 1977:106). Therefore,

> One thus has to acknowledge that practice has a logic which is not that of logic, if one is to avoid asking of it more logic than it can give, thereby condemning oneself either to wring incoherences out of it or to thrust upon it a forced coherence. (Bourdieu 1977:109)

In sum, this paper is a plea against 'essentialisation': of witches, who are not fixed once and for all but get identified contextually; of Zande thought, which is not an abstract, theoretical system but a set of contested beliefs that are pragmatically deployed; of the Zande themselves, who have become reified after 'their' (1937) monograph but have had a history since.

NOTES

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1.The literature on these is vast. A selection: Lévy-Bruhl (1910), Evans-Pritchard (1956), Gellner (1962), Firth (1966), Lukes (1967), Smith (1972), Turner (1991).

2.Equally part of the 'Zande logic' and rationality debate are questions of the alleged closure of the system of knowledge and the notion of secondary elaborations (cf. Polanyi 1958; Horton 1993).

3.Yet the contradiction does not disappear automatically. If proposition (3) is given the truth-value true, as I think Cooper intends, then for the argument to be non-contradictory according to Lukasiewicz's logic, proposition (2) would *also* be indeterminate, i.e. neither true nor false. This seems unreasonable, however, and it is precisely on this point that McCawley proposes to replace the truth-value in Lukasiewicz's table (McCawley 1993:462). Proposition (2) then becomes false.

4.I have basically used Jenning's (1989) version of Tripplett's argument since it is more faithful to Evans-Pritchard's account.

5.The latter is analysed in an analogous discussion on the logics of scientific and religious thought by Skorupski (1973).

6.This definition raises the question whether Evans-Pritchard meant both parts of the conjunction to be necessary conditions for witchhood -- in which case the possession of the substance alone was not a sufficient condition. An earlier article on the subject suggests he did: "amongst the A-Zande there are two requirements to an act of witchcraft, the possession of *mangu* and an evil disposition" (Evans-Pritchard 1929:241).

7.A similar argument has been made by those who oppose calling an amalgam of proverbs, folk wisdom and worldviews 'African philosophy', which is then put on a par with, and compared to, Western philosophy. See Hountondji's (1976) critique of what he dubbed 'ethno-philosophy'.

8.But in a footnote to the earlier article one reads: "The belief in descent of *mangu* in the male line and the implications of this belief are very irregular and *illogical*" (Evans-Pritchard 1929:237; emphasis added). It should also be pointed out that Lévy-Bruhl revised some of his ideas in light of Evans-Pritchard's criticisms: see his letter written in 1934 and published posthumously (Lévy-Bruhl 1952).

9.Here, too, the literature is vast. See especially the contributions in Wilson (1970) and Hollis and Lukes (1982). I will limit the discussion mainly to Winch (1964), Horton (1976) and Taylor (1982).

10.My thanks to David Graeber, who suggested this example to me.

11.Compare: "Contradictions between their beliefs are not noticed by Azande because the beliefs are not all present at the same time but function in different situations. They are therefore not brought into opposition" (Evans-Pritchard 1937:475).

12.For instance, about *lyali*, the nights, that constitute the heart of winter, Bourdieu writes: "Proof that *lyali*, which every informant mentions, is not 'a period of forty days' [...] but a simple scansion of passing time, is found in the fact that different informants ascribe to it different durations and different dates [...] Depending on the precision with which the event considered has to be localized, on the nature of the event, and on the social status of the agent concerned, different systems of oppositions are seen to emerge: [...] the period known as *lyali*, far from being defined -- as in a perfectly ordinate series -- in relation to the period which preceded it and the period which follows it, and only in relation to them, can be opposed to [a number of periods]" (Bourdieu 1977:105ff.).

13."Of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science, the most fundamental, and the most ruinous, is the one that is set up between subjectivism and objectivism" (Bourdieu 1990:25).

14.Science itself is no longer considered an entirely theoretical endeavour. Various practice-oriented approaches of science can be found in Pickering (1992).

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