The Azande Redemption: The Victim-Blaming Logics of Zande Witchcraft

Tingfeng Yan
London School of Economics and Political Science

Good ethnographies can be reinterpreted a thousand times. Evans-Pritchard’s Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande (1976) is a good example which, though originally written with structural-functionalism in mind in the 1930s, has been re-examined from multiple perspectives since its first publication (e.g. Winch 1964; Graeber 2015). This is what I do here. Drawing on and adapting Durkheim’s notion of society with ‘an essentially religious – “godly” – core’ (Durkheim 2008; Strenski 2015: 134) and Bakhtin’s (1981) literary critique of the 2nd century Latin-language story, The Golden Ass (Apuleius 1992), I suggest there is a deeply embedded theme of redemption in the way Azande deal with witchcraft. ‘Redemption’ here means the discontinuation of wrong-doings, and these wrong-doings can be towards others. On one hand, this definition draws on the original Latin word redimere’s meaning ‘to buy back’ (Klein 1971: 623) which I take to imply a restoration to an original state where no wrongs are done. On the other hand, taking into account the Zande logics of witchcraft which will be detailed later, I add an intersubjective dimension to ‘redemption’. That is, while the usual Christianity-influenced notion of redemption tends to be self-centred, being about redeeming oneself, I propose to understand the Azande we need to see how one can redeem ‘to’ others. In this sense, if I discontinue doing wrongs to you, then I say I redeem to you. Among the Azande, while accused witches redeem to the bewitched, the bewitched also redeem to something I call the ideal of sociality in the indigenous ‘sociologistic metaphysic’ (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 313). This ideal of sociality, or reified social norms, is

---

1It should be noted that the copy of the book that this article refers to throughout is the 1976 abridged version edited by Eva Gillies. Also, to help the flow of the prose I use present tense throughout when talking about the Azande, which doesn't imply that the Azande never change.
what ‘those whom we would call good citizens’ and ‘rich’, ‘powerful’ people embody, such as good neighbourship, generosity and open-mindedness (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 52). From a western perspective such ideal of sociality may be interpreted to have a similar status that a Durkheimian sacralised society does. Ultimately, the bewitched themselves are to blame for their victimisation as they provoke such ideal in the first place.

I’ll first explain how I adapt and use the Durkheimian notion of a ‘godly’ society (Strenski 2015: 134). Evans-Pritchard actually criticises it in his Nuer Religion (1956: 313): ‘This postulate of sociologistic metaphysic seems to me to be an assertion for which evidence is totally lacking. It was Durkheim and not the savage who made society into a god’. He seems right in pointing out that the Durkheimian society-god relationship is only a western heuristic which we shouldn’t reduce the local logics to, but his representation of Durkheim here may be too caricaturistic. Durkheim does talk about how society may invoke nonmaterial feelings, but it may risk being reductionist and unsubstantiated to say Durkheim simply collapses ‘society’ and ‘god’ into one thing without much caution and acknowledgement of the complexity of both, which Pickering (2009: 232-235) and Strenski (2015: 134-135) did a good job to demonstrate by a careful reading of Durkheim’s original texts. However, to circumvent Durkheim’s notion of ‘religion’ loaded with western dichotomies such as the natural/supernatural, sacred/profane divides, here I adopt Evans-Pritchard’s phrase ‘sociologistic metaphysic’ (1956: 313) to talk about ways local people conceive of nonphysical things such as witchcraft in relation to their society. Azande’s logics of witchcraft are part of their sociologistic metaphysic. I argue that sociality, the quality of being in a society, may be revered and idealised in Azande’s sociologistic metaphysic to a considerable extent, which looks like people worshipping their society from a Durkheimian perspective.

My discussion begins with Evans-Pritchard’s classic description of Azande’s belief in witchcraft (mangu) (Evans-Pritchard 1976: vii) and then his analysis. In Zandeland, witchcraft is part of normal everyday life and everyone’s common sense (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 1, 31). An ‘innate, inherited ability to cause misfortune or death’ (Niehaus 2012), witchcraft, in theory, could only be practiced by those who were born with an oval blackish ‘witchcraft substance’ in their belly (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 1-2). However, since it is impossible to know this, a practical assumption in Zandeland is everyone is potentially a witch (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 55). Witchcraft depends upon feelings
of ‘hatred, envy, jealousy, and greed’ towards a victim and a grievous witch may cause misfortune or death to their victim without being aware of it (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 45, 56-64). If one carries out ‘an activity’ such as hunting elephants ‘according to traditional rules of technique’, any ensuing misfortune such as death does not happen by chance but result from a witch’s ill will (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 18-19, 30). Azande use a hunting metaphor to illustrate the relationship between the direct cause of their death (e.g. the elephant) and witchcraft. Given that Zande hunters traditionally kill a game with (at least) two spears, people would say that ‘the elephant is the first spear and that witchcraft is the second spear and that together they killed the man’ (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 25-26).

Azande suspect witchcraft anytime misfortune happens, and consult oracles or witch-doctors to discover the witch’s identity when concern compels them to do so (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 33-34, 66). Though angered and annoyed by witchcraft, which everybody frowns upon (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 19), according to convention the victim nevertheless needs to treat the alleged witch kindly in the hope that the witch’s grievance will stop (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 34, 43). As a traditional procedure, the alleged witch is required to blow out some water to show they would harbour no further grievance and practice no further witchcraft even if they were the witch (which they often deny) (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 43-44). While the Azande aren’t very interested in analysing the social-wide implications of their witchcraft belief, Evans-Pritchard is. Presenting the overall pattern of witchcraft accusation, Evans-Pritchard (1976: 51-52) points out that so-called ‘good citizens’ and the ‘rich’ and the ‘powerful’ are ‘seldom accused of witchcraft’, while the accused are often ‘glum and ill-tempered’, ‘dirty’, ‘unmannerly’, ‘spiteful’, ‘offensive’, greedy, ‘mutilated’, et cetera. From a structural-functionalist perspective, Evans-Pritchard (1976: 54-55) concludes, as anti-social behaviour is the witch’s mark, witchcraft in Zandeland functions as ‘a valuable corrective to uncharitable impulses, because a show of spleen or meanness or hostility may bring serious consequences in its train’. In Evans-Pritchard’s narrative, the theme of the witch’s redemption is seen thus: the witch is supposed to discontinue doing wrongs towards the bewitched, that is, stop harbouring grievance which leads to witchcraft.

However, although this process only involves the redemption of the witch, a deeper theme of Zande witchcraft might actually be the victim’s redemption to the ideal of sociality or what Durkheimians would
call a godly society. What draws my attention to this is Bakhtin’s (1981) analysis of Apuleius’ (1992) classical 2nd-century witchcraft-related story, The Golden Ass. Apuleius was a Berber from what is now Algeria and lived under the Roman Empire. As Bakhtin (1981: 121) states, ‘corresponding mythological equivalents might be found for all the narrative motifs in The Golden Ass’. Though I do not take this statement mechanically, I suggest that Apuleius’ story and Bakhtin’s analysis provide useful heuristic tools.

The Golden Ass tells of a ‘frivolous’ ‘voluptuary’ (Bakhtin 1981: 117), Lucius, who seeks the excitement of witchcraft and applies to himself a wrong potion due to recklessness, falls its victim and is transformed into an ass (Apuleius 1992: 47). He is thus punished for his pleasure-seeking life. After enduring much hardship, in the last chapter he prays to Isis, a goddess of Egyptian origin referred to as the ‘supreme of Divinities’ and asks for the restoration of human shape, but ‘if any offended deity oppresses me with inexorable cruelty [i.e. doesn’t grant him the human shape], may it at least be lawful for me to die’ (Apuleius 1992: 193-194). After fulfilling Isis’s demand of ‘highly detailed purifying rituals and askesis [i.e. severe self-discipline]’ (Bakhtin 1981: 117), Lucius becomes a human again and later a cleric worshipping Isis. His regaining human shape is based on his redemption, or discontinuation of being an impure, reckless voluptuary. Given that ‘human affairs were entirely governed by her [Isis’s] providence’ (Apuleius 1992: 192), Isis may be in some way responsible for not only Lucius’ redemption but his initial metamorphosis into an ass too, which he seems conscious about when he mentions offending divinity (perhaps by seeking pleasure and playing with witchcraft recklessly) in the prayer to Isis. Bakhtin (1981: 118) summarised this story with a four-step formula: ‘guilt->punishment->redemption->blessedness’. To use a Zande notion, in Lucius’ metamorphosis into an ass his mistake picking potions may be the ‘first spear’, with the invisible supernatural power attributable to Isis, like witchcraft, playing the role of the ‘second spear’.

I suggest that the witchcraft’s power among the Azande may be essentially the same thing as Isis’ power in The Golden Ass. Why? If we start with the famous Durkheimian argument about how society may have a ‘religious’, or ‘godly’ core

2It should be acknowledged that the theological system in The Golden Ass may be occasionally confusing. For example, some pages later Isis’s husband deity, Osiris, is mentioned as ‘the greatest of the highest’ (Apuleius 1992: 213), which seems to contradict Isis’s status as the ‘supreme of Divinities’. While there may be a mixture of monotheistic and polytheistic tendencies in The Golden Ass, here when talking about Lucius’ story I take Isis to be the chief responsible supernatural force because she’s the only omnipotent deity present in the immediate context of Lucius’ metamorphosis.
(Strenski 2015: 134), Isis could be understood as a reified godly figure that emerges in the process of society’s sacralisation. Likewise, the Zande notion of witchcraft is no less than the manifestation of the same Durkheimian godly society.

I will now argue Isis is a goddess of sociality (the quality of being in a society). As a major point in his literary critique, Bakhtin remarks that Lucius is portrayed as unrelated to wider society and his whole story is ‘private and individual’, which Bakhtin suggests is a generalisable feature of Roman adventure novels of everyday life (1981: 119-120). However, when we put Isis into the picture we see how Lucius’ sociality is featured in the story. When Isis as the second spear perpetuates Lucius’ punishment, he is turned into an ass that can only interact with people in a less meaningful way and his sociality diminishes considerably. In contrast, the redemption makes Lucius blessed, and his sociality is returned to him. After Lucius regains the human shape, his ‘domestics’, ‘servants’ and blood-relatives stop mourning for ‘the false relation of my [Lucius’s] death’ (i.e. loss of sociality) and ‘hastened immediately to see’ him (Apuleius 1992: 203-204). Finally Lucius is initiated as a cleric for Isis, giving him even greater sociality among people he does not know on an immediate personal level. During and after the initiation rituals, there are ‘a conflux of the people… honouring’ him and ‘banquets’ (Apuleius 1992: 207-208). It is because of Isis that Lucius is transformed from the ‘private and isolated’ individual (or donkey) (Bakhtin 1981: 119) to a person with significant sociality only in the story’s last few pages. Isis may thus be a goddess in charge of sociality.

The Zande notion of witchcraft is also saturated with sociality which a ‘godly society’, as the Durkheimians would say, would concern itself with. Misfortune is due to people’s ubiquitous social grievances towards each other, not because of natural causes outside of the human society (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 18-19, 43, 53). Just as sociality is an abstract, impersonal notion rather than referring to any concrete relationships, witchcraft is understood to operate ‘impersonally and apart from any particular witch or witches’ (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 13). Usually you can only be bewitched by people who are physically close, share roughly the same social status, and have concrete social ties with you (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 12, 47, 49). These three conditions are all about increased sociality. If one becomes bewitched they know someone hates them (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 24), meaning their sociality doesn’t work well. Bewitchment is essentially a punishment for bad sociality. To
solve it, the bewitched mobilises their sociality by contacting a ‘close kinsman or a son-in-law’ or other reliable ones to arrange an oracle consultation (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 39). Alternatively, they can hold high-profile public séances where witch-doctors divine the identity of the witch and combat witchcraft through magical means. Such séances ‘increase the social prestige of a householder who initiates them’ (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 77), also indicating the positive manipulation of sociality. We should remember that the identified witch must be treated well to be persuaded to stop practicing witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 34, 43), which is also a sign of turning negative social relations into positive ones.

In brief, the notion of witchcraft socially ties every Zande person together. As a diffuse, impersonal power operating intersubjectively, Zande witchcraft may be understood as reinforcing the local ideal of sociality, or what Durkheimians would call a godly society. This godly society is double faced: it punishes with witchcraft for bad sociality and spares those cultivating good sociality. It is like a cat-and-mouse game, the society being the cat and the individual being the mouse. It uses witchcraft to repeatedly threaten and torture individuals when they do not conform. Hence, it can be said the witchcraft victim redeems to the ideal of sociality in their local sociologistic metaphysic like Lucius redeems to Isis. Although on the surface witches are blamed by victims and the general (godly) society, which Evans-Pritchard suggests in his analysis, the real logics of witchcraft are deeply victim-blaming: if you are not sociable, you get attacked by witches through whom the godly society manifests itself (see Picture 1).

Therefore it can be said that in Zande witchcraft, although on the surface we see witches’ redemption to the bewitched, on a deeper level the bewitched redeem to the ideal of sociality. An important line of inquiry could begin from seeing how such victim-blaming logics in Zande witchcraft may in some way resemble some similar logics in the west to ‘make the familiar strange’ (Blum 2013: 1). One example can be how western scholars interpret the massive early modern European witch-hunts where we can view the accused female witches as victims.

Diagram 1.
who suffer tortures and burnings (as opposed to the Zande and Roman cases where the bewitched are victims) (Federici 2004). Though in modern scholarly works their persecutors are clearly said to be wrong, that is, in need of redeeming to these victims, we can see a hidden ‘tendency to blame the victims’ as ‘social failures’, such as, according to 20th century psychiatrists Franz Alexander and Sheldon Selesnick (1977), ‘perverts’ who ‘enjoyed teasing their male inquisitors with their sexual fantasies’ (Federici 2004: 164). It is therefore implied that their persecutors may in some way represent a godly society to which these ‘perverts’ should redeem themselves. This is but an example of such victim-blaming logics if we turn the gaze upon the Azande to the west.

Acknowledgements
I am greatly indebted to all those who kindly advised me on how to revise the paper. They are the Student Anthropologist’s anonymous peer reviewers, editors, and Dr Geoffrey Hughes and Dr Mathijs Pelkmans at the London School of Economics.

References Cited