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Modern Zande Prophetesses

Margaret Buckner

The vocabulary E. E. Evans-Pritchard used to describe various aspects of witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Zande of central Africa has been widely applied or adapted in anthropological studies of dissimilar peoples, in East Africa as well as in other parts of the world. Returning for a fresh look at the Zande in the context of divination and prophecy is thus useful as a reminder of Evans-Pritchard's original analysis of divination and oracles.

In addition, this Zande case offers an exceptional opportunity for the historical observation of the disappearance of one kind of diviner, the witch-doctor, and the emergence of women "prophetesses", which will be the focal point for this paper. In the late 1920s, Evans-Pritchard was witness to some of the remaining traces of pre-colonial Zande society in southwestern Sudan. Furthermore, he supplemented his own observations with a quantity of texts taken down from elderly informants who had grown up in pre-colonial days. We therefore have a fairly complete portrait of "ideal" traditional Zande society as it existed before the arrival of European colonial administrators and missionaries. I should stress that all the texts I have gathered from older Zande in the Central African Republic during the 1980s fully corroborate Evans-Pritchard's major theses concerning the Zande conceptual world. I do not hesitate therefore to base an overview of traditional Zande society on his works.¹

Evans-Pritchard chose to express Zande terms in a language familiar to his readers. He selected English words which he then systematically used in one-to-one correspondence with Zande terms. Thus, "witchcraft" corresponds to *mangu*, "magic (or sorcery)" to *ngua*,² "witch-doctor" to *binza*, etc. It is important to remember, therefore, that when he uses "witchcraft" in the Zande context, the connotations are those of Zande *mangu*, rather than those of witchcraft elsewhere. In short, Zande witchcraft is held to be an innate power to injure others which emanates from a physical organ in the witch's abdomen. Magicians (and sorcerers), on the other hand, use substances and outward actions to attain their ends. Although similar means of

¹ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937). The Zande, numbering less than one million, inhabit the regions of the Nile-Zaire watershed, and are divided among the modern nations of the Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Zaïre. Their language belongs to the Ubanguian branch of the Adamawa-Ubangui family (Greenberg's Adamawa-Eastern). I use the Zande plural prefix *a-* only in Zande contexts (in italics).

² This is one of the rare cases in which Evans-Pritchard deviated from a one-to-one Zande term-English term

divination are employed in both cases, this distinction is of great importance in seeking to understand Zande social behavior.

As Evans-Pritchard explains:

Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them in virtue of any inherent quality. A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act. They believe also that sorcerers may do them ill by performing magic rites with bad medicines. Azande distinguish clearly between witches and sorcerers. Against both they employ diviners, oracles, and medicines.³

Zande consult "oracles" and "diviners" to determine who or what is doing them harm. Evans-Pritchard uses the word "oracle" to translate "techniques which are supposed to reveal what cannot be discovered at all, or cannot be discovered for certain, by experiment and logical inferences therefrom".⁴ The major Zande oracles were: *benge*, the poison oracle; *iwa*, the rubbing board oracle; *mapingo*, the three sticks oracle, and *dakpa*, the termite oracle. Zande has no generic word for "oracle", but the verb *soroka* is used with these techniques, best translated by "to consult an oracle". The source of the power of oracles is in the object or material substance of the oracle itself, or in the plants eaten by the operator. Zande oracles are not mediums; they take the inanimate pronoun, and are not personified.⁵ Oracles were (and are) extremely important in daily life to determine the cause of calamity, and to indicate whether a given activity would be propitious or not. Furthermore, the poison oracle (*benge*) played an essential role in witchcraft cases. Monopolized by the noble class, it was rules of evidence, judge, jury and witnesses all rolled into one.⁶

Evans-Pritchard's working definition of "divination" is "a method of discovering what is unknown, and often cannot be known, by experiment and logic". He names two sources which inspire human diviners: "medicines" (*ngua*), and ghosts (a-toro), which correspond respectively to witch-doctors (a-binza), by far the most common Zande diviner, and ghost-diviners.⁷

I would like to underline a distinction between "prophecy", in the sense of foretelling future events, and "divination", in the sense of indicating the presence of witchcraft (or magic), whether past, present, or future. Thus, "divination" overlaps "prophecy" in the sense of foretelling the outcome—the success or failure—of an intended activity depending on whether or not witchcraft will intervene. Diviners and oracles are not asked general questions, such as "what does the future hold?", but rather they are asked yes/no questions concerning specific situations which may or may not be affected by witchcraft. Zande do not seek to know the future, but only whether they will be harmed by witchcraft (or sorcery) during a given activity, and this they seek to know only to be able to protect themselves by avoiding or

³ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, p. 21.

⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 320-21; cf. also 465.

⁶ Ibid., p. 267. See especially p. 288: "The Prince's oracles reveal matters of tribal importance, judged criminal and civil cases, and determine whether vengeance has been enacted for death". And again at p. 86: "... The only act of witchcraft that is legally recognized by punishment meted out to a witch is the crime of murder

counteracting the harmful source before it has a chance to act.⁸ Evans-Pritchard occasionally uses the verb "prophesy" in the sense of predicting, but only in the sense of revealing "mystical" forces soon to be at work, and so-called "prophecies" are actually warnings that witchcraft will interfere with a given plan of action. The word "prophet" is absent from his descriptions of traditional Zande society.

Since Evans-Pritchard's field work among the Zande, a new character has entered the scene:⁹ *Nagidi*, women who have functions which are both "religious" and "divinatory". They are called "prophetesses" in the local French. (*Bagidi*, their male counterparts, also exist, but as they are usually only assistants to the *Nagidi* in their religious functions, or at least were so originally, I here continue to use the pronoun "she".) Unfortunately, I have not been able to carry out systematic research on the subject, so this paper offers only a brief sketch some of the most basic features of the *Nagidi*, to lay the groundwork, so to speak, for further investigation.

During trips to Zandeland in the southeastern corner of the Central African Republic, I have often taken notice of the "native" Zande church, *Nzapa Zande*, and have even met its founder, Awa Marie, who lives in a village just outside Zemio. It seems to me to be a "normal" or at least understandable consequence of three quarters of a century of Christian missions, and Zande society coming to terms with the invading modern world. Awa, and other women "priestesses" or "prophetesses", *Nagidi*, are "chosen" by "God" to direct congregations in His honor. Many of their teachings parallel Christian doctrine; the rituals and songs, at least in appearance, are if anything more Christian than those of the Christian missionaries. Many a Zande village is nowadays divided into three sections rather than the usual two: besides worrying about each other, the Catholics and the Protestants now have a *Nzapa Zande* faction to contend with.

Besides their religious function proper as leaders of *Nzapa Zande* congregations, these women can "see" the "mystical" reasons or causes for misfortune, including the guilt or innocence of suspected witches. Their ability to do so, like their religious knowledge, is said to come from God. A few people have also told me that their visions are associated with "genies", animal-like creatures which live near streams. An elderly Zande gave the following description of Zande oracles:

Here among us, in Africa, the thing that was most common in the past among our forefathers was *benge*, consulted by putting it into the mouths of chickens. But nowadays that no longer exists. What we use today is this: we cut the neck of a chicken, while addressing it (*sima ru*), so that if the answer to the question is 'yes', the (dying) chicken falls with its left wing topmost, and if the answer is 'no', it falls with its right wing topmost... Also, we go to the *Nagidi*. One goes there and explains the matter, and she sees a dream (*masumo*) about it. If you are not the guilty party, she says, no, it's not you. And if it is you who are responsible, the dream tells her that as well.

It seems that these women had no conscious desire to become *Nagidi*, but were "chosen" by *mbori* ("God"). They have undergone unique psycho-physical experiences, often including episodes of simulated death or near-death, followed by a

sort of resurrection or reawakening from death, after which they have special powers of divination and seeing, and are transmitters of the word of God. Many people have told me that because these women have been in communion with God during their (so-called) death, they have special powers that come from Him.

Here is a summarized account given by a Zande man (a member of the Nzapa Zande congregation in Nguyo) on how two such Nagidi were "chosen", the first being Awa Marie herself, the founder of the Nzapa Zande sect :

God seized her in Finzani [a village 9 km from Zemio], where she was staying with her father. God didn't seize her through illness that made her sick; he made rocks rain down upon her until she died. After remaining dead for a while, she awoke. They took her to the *gendarmes'* office where the commander was. They took her to the hospital, but the doctor examined her in vain: he found no sign of illness. They sent her home, and she began to teach her religion [*pa mbori*] to all of us. We still follow it in the same way.

He tells of the experience of Nasunga Marie, the Nagidi in Nguyo:

God didn't seize her through sickness either. He seized her and threw her to the ground, where she lay senseless for a long while. My father himself [the village chief] came to pray over her. He lifted her, and as he did she began speaking the word of God. And so it [her religion] continues today.

Boniface Ngabondo, a Zande doctoral student in Paris, was present at two Nagidi "seances" in August 1989 in the westernmost regions of Zandeland. The following excerpts, presented here with his kind permission, are adapted from his descriptions of cases he personally observed, the first four in the Zande quarter of Bangassou, the last three in Rafai. For the present purposes, only brief summaries suffice to indicate the questions put before the Nagidi and her answers. (More lengthy descriptions, especially of the ritual aspects of the seances, constitute an unpublished article by Mr. Ngabondo.)

- I. A schoolgirl, mother of a child, fails her exams several times. Unbeknownst to her parents, she decides to go to join the father of her child, who resides in Bangui, the capital. But the latter lets her know that he wants nothing to do with her. She consults the Nagidi to find out why she has been failing her exams, and why her husband/fiancé rejects her.

Response: According to the Nagidi, the girl had quarrelled with her mother, who then cursed her daughter. The Nagidi says the evil curse would be alleviated if the daughter begged her mother's forgiveness.

- II. A woman does not get along with her brother, with whom she resides. She asks the Nagidi if their discord is the result of a curse.

Response: According to the Nagidi, there are two causes: first, their dead mother's ghost has long been angry because the man mistreats his sister; and second, the man has never made the proper offerings (*tuka*) to his mother's ghost. The Nagidi advises the man to leave off mistreating his sister, and to appease his mother's ghost with an offering.

- III. A man has accused his sister-in-law of bewitching her husband, who has been seriously injured in a hunting accident. She then consults the Nagidi to uncover the true culprit.
- Response:* Rather than proclaiming her innocence, the Nagidi indeed accuses the woman of having pronounced malicious words against her husband, which then (as in the first case), caused her husband's accident. She would be cleansed by a public confession (*kusa pai*).
- IV. A woman whose son is seriously ill consults the Nagidi to discover the cause of his illness.
- Response:* The sick man had started to wear a charm to protect himself while he worked. Having then lost his job, he should have gotten rid of the charm. Since he did not, the charm changed its function from protecting life to destroying it.
- V. A man threatened his wife with a knife for having left him, and also her parents because he believed they gave her bad advice. (The reporter is confused as to who actually posed the question, the man or the woman.)
- Response:* According to the Nagidi, the man had asked Mbori ("God") to never have children because he would be incapable of raising them. Mbori heard his prayer and rendered his wife infertile. She then left him to try to have a child with another man. In order to "erase" his plea to Mbori, the man was ordered to sweep out the cult's courtyard for one month.
- VI. The mother of a sick baby brings it to the Nagidi to determine the cause of the illness.
- Response:* According to the Nagidi, the baby is sick because of an insufficiency of blood, as indicated by a whitening of the skin and eyes. She recommends that the woman take her baby to the hospital.
- VII. Three months ago, a man bought a new gun, but has never yet succeeded in killing an animal with it. Every animal he shoots at manages to escape, and yet he is an excellent shot. He asks the Nagidi the cause for his failure to kill game with the new gun.
- Response:* This case had actually been presented two weeks previously, but was suspended until the object in question, the gun, could be brought from the man's village over 30 km away. The first response given by the Nagidi was that the man refused to pay the seller of gun what he owed him. The seller had sworn that as long as the buyer hadn't paid him his due, he wouldn't kill a single animal with the gun.

The following summary offers yet another example of the type of intervention in which Nagidi (and Bagidi) are involved. It was given by one of the elders called in to judge a case which I personally observed during my last stay in Zandeland in 1988.

S seduced D's wife, who then fell ill. As the illness continued for a long time, they interrogated her, to seek the reason for her illness: she confessed her love affair with S

since his own wife had died as a result of her affair with S, he (D) would seduce S's wife and kill her; she would suffer in the same way as his own wife had suffered. So, D seduced her, and directed magic (*manga sino*) against her, and she subsequently died. Her family took the affair to court, where D was formally accused: since S had gone after his wife and she had died, therefore D had "poisoned" S's wife so that she would also die. We elders were called to judge the affair. After hearing the case, it was determined that D was guilty. S's wife's family demanded that D be imprisoned. They rehashed the affair, trying to decide whether to imprison him or to order him to pay a fine to S's wife's family in compensation. The chief guarded him while oracles were consulted. D's guilt was confirmed either by *iwa* or *bagidi*. (It hadn't yet been decided whether he would be imprisoned or fined.)

Finally, I happened upon a case in Zemio in which a Nagidi was the final "judge" in a "murder" trial. A man was accused of having changed into a water genie (*kpiri*) and causing a man to drown in a village fifty miles north. A huge crowd was gathered outside the hut where the Nagidi had sequestered herself to render a verdict. In front of the hut was the suspect, his hands tied behind him and two *gendarmes* by his side. Among the crowd were several high functionaries, including, at least for part of the time, the assistant governor, the mayor, and the police chief, waiting to cart the suspect off to prison in case of a guilty verdict.

As I stated earlier, in calling these Nagidi "prophetesses" I am merely following the lead of the local inhabitants. It is perhaps questionable, however, whether they are really "prophets" in the strict sense (rather than "seers", for example). As these particular examples show, the questions put before the Nagidi concern the past and present as well as the future (in fact, it is difficult to separate the future from the present).

To what extent is it possible to trace the origin of the Nagidi to traditional figures in Zande society? Let us turn back to two possible forerunners of the Nagidi: ghost-diviners and witch-doctors.

Our ideas about "ghost diviners" are obscure. In his definition of divination, Evans-Pritchard includes *a-boro a-toro*, or ghost-diviners, but unfortunately mentions them only briefly in *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, and not much more substantially elsewhere:

There are in Zande society persons who divine through communion with ghosts of the dead, whereas the witch-doctor is fatidical in virtue of medicines".

Ghost-diviners eat medicines to put them in contact with ghosts...¹⁰

Ghost-diviners are people who are able to communicate with the ghosts of the dead, usually through dreams, and are generally women.¹¹

In his short survey of the phenomenon, Evans-Pritchard describes how three women became ghost-diviners. In the first example, the ghosts made Nabaru dream that men were carrying the corpse of her father, who was away at war. She awoke, and at dawn "people came bearing the corpse of her father. Messages from the ghosts

¹⁰ *Respectively, ibid.*, pp. 157 and 441.

came to her ever afterwards."¹² In the second example, Naakadumu went fishing, and caught a crab and a frog. She returned home, and put them into a pot of water on the fire. When the water got hot, the crab escaped from the pot, and ran and entered a hole at the head of the stream. Naakadumu reached into the hole to seize the crab, "when it cried out aloud like a man". Horrified, she ran away shrieking and fell into a chasm. People came and beat a drum, and after a while she came out and they all returned home. "She refused all food, but she ate flies for food. The ghosts continued ever afterwards to trouble her."¹³

The third woman, Nambua, said that, "She died and they dug a grave for her and everyone wailed. Her soul went forth and appeared at the place of ghosts. She was just looking about when all her relatives collected and made a circle around her. It was her mother who said to her, 'What have you come here for? Get up and go whence you came. Go away quickly.' She departed from amongst these people and her eyes at once opened. Everyone ceased wailing and she began immediately to wake from death and recovered completely."¹⁴

It is significant that these "ghost diviners" of old underwent a sort of "initiation". The first woman was struck by her father's death (rather than her own); the second fell into a chasm; the third underwent a sort of "death, burial, and resurrection", very similar to that described for the Nagidi of modern times.

Several early missionaries have also written about what could also be called "ghost-diviners", but the discussion is complicated by the similar translation of two different Zande terms : *a-toro*, or ghosts of the dead, and *a-girisa*, often translated as "evil spirits". Very different appreciations have been given for these two terms. First, Evans-Pritchard says that *a-toro* "are benevolent beings, at least as benevolent as a Zande father of a family, and their occasional participation in the world they have left behind them is on the whole orderly and conducive to the welfare of their children".¹⁵ As opposed to these "ordinary ghosts", the *a-girisa* are the evil ghosts of dead witches, who "show a venomous hatred of humanity". He states that neither he nor Major P. M. Larken have heard much of them in the Sudan, though Mgr. Lagae describes them among the Zande of Zaire; he does not suggest that they are dead witches.¹⁶

Father Giorgetti, in contrast, makes rather much of *a-ira-a-girisa*, which are either evil spirits or the souls of dead witches; he describes in depth the "hysterical" behavior of those possessed by the *a-girisa*. Of special interest to us here is his statement that "under the influence of these spirits, [the possessed] predict the future, and for this, are paid." He cites a Zande text dated 1928: "Afterwards, ... he says that he has been to where God is, that he knows all things, that he knows who the witches are, that he knows what people will do in the future."¹⁷

¹² Ibid., p. 183.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 183-4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 184).

¹⁵ Evans-Pritchard *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic* n 39

Father Giorgetti also, however, describes certain *a-ira-toro*, who are believed to have been in contact with spirits beyond the grave: they suffer from a strange inexplicable illness, or show symptoms such as unexpected prolonged fainting spells that give the impression of death. The Zande think that during the hours when he was unconscious, he was in fact with the spirits of the ancestors. He continues, translating a Zande text, "people say that the *ira-a-toro* is capable of knowing the evil acts committed by living persons, because he has been to where the ghosts of the ancestors live with God." Father Giorgetti also states that both these personages have become rare or extinct. "Today, if the *a-ira-a-girisa* are out-dated, so much the more so are the *a-ira-a-toro*. Only the elders beyond 50 years of age can give information about them."¹⁸

Given these different accounts of Zande spiritual entities, it is perhaps impossible to clearly state exactly what Zande believed at the turn of the century. But we can at least safely say that there was some sort of belief in people—women, according to Evans-Pritchard, Lagae, Philipps (cited by Evans-Pritchard), and Larken¹⁹—who had special "prophetic" powers visited upon them by the ghosts, usually after some sort of psychological crisis or illness, often simulated or temporary death. Certain people (whether *a-ira-a-toro* or *a-ira-a-girisa* is not always clear) have, during simulated death, visited the spirits of the ancestors (who live with God in Father Giorgetti's account), and they can thereafter reveal spiritual actions.

How far is it possible to say that the Nagidi of modern days are more or less direct descendants of these women ghost-diviners? In spite of their many striking similarities, one crucial difference, at least, separates them: whereas the ghost diviners were inspired by ghosts (but not exclusively in Father Giorgetti's account), the Nagidi receive their visions from a God-like *mbori*. Whereas "the ghosts of the dead cannot be appealed to as arbiters of morals and sanctions of conduct, because the ghosts are members of kinship groups and only exercise authority within these groups,"²⁰ the *mbori* of today is indeed perceived of as not only morally just and good, but also as omniscient. This indicates a profound shift in the Zande notion of *mbori*, which we will examine shortly.

A second personage in traditional Zande society from which Nagidi seem to have inherited certain functions are the witch-doctors (*a-binza*), who had an important and often underestimated role in traditional Zande society. Witch-doctors were "a corporation of diviners who are believed to diagnose and combat witchcraft".²¹ Evans-Pritchard describes their functions as those of a diviner who exposes witches,²² a magician who "thwarts them",²³ and leech, who "repairs the ravages of witchcraft".²⁴ "Every witch-doctor is a professional indicator of

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 247-252.

¹⁹ Larken, P.M., Further Impressions of the Azande, *Sudan Notes and Records*, XIII (1930).

²⁰ Evans-Pritchard, *Zande Theology*, p. 110.

²¹ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, p. 11.

²² Ibid. pp. 149 168 185 187-8 258

witchcraft."²⁵ "In both roles [diviner and leech] his task is the same—to counteract witchcraft. As a diviner he discovers the location of witchcraft, and as a leech he repairs its ravages."²⁶

Witch-doctors revealed crimes of witchcraft, and their revelations were subject to confirmation by the poison oracle. A significant feature of witch-doctors is that they intervened before death, rather than after. When someone died, the case was taken to the prince's oracle. It could therefore be said that witch-doctors had a greater role in collectively stymying and reducing the threat of witchcraft than in punishing actual cases of witchcraft or bringing about vengeance. Along this line, oracles and magic in general are secret, private acts, and must be kept hidden from others, lest witchcraft interfere with their efficacy. Witch-doctors, on the contrary, held their seances in public, before crowds, actively seeking out witchcraft in order to thwart it, and were not at all threatened by it.²⁷ Thus, a function which was uniquely theirs was that of actively fighting against witchcraft. The fact that merely revealing witchcraft was not their primary function, but that this revelation was accompanied by collective anti-witchcraft action, helps account for the witch-doctors' popularity (or even their very existence), in spite of their low rating among Zande oracles: they were tied for third place with the rubbing-board oracle for reliability.²⁸

The witch-doctors' source of power was plants (*ngua*, Evans-Pritchard: "medicines").²⁹ Those who desired to become witch-doctors went through a long apprenticeship in which they learned which plants to eat and how to prepare them properly. This knowledge of the proper plants had to be paid for, as did the services of the witch-doctor, since, as is generally true in Zandeland, payment determined the efficacy of magic.³⁰ Witch-doctors underwent an initiation ceremony, described in great detail by Evans-Pritchard, involving symbolic "death, burial, resurrection".³¹

Most interestingly, Evans-Pritchard relates how the few existing myths accounting for the origins of witch-doctors and their powers involve women. According to two of these myths or legends, the first witch-doctor was a woman; and the medicines eaten by witch-doctors originally came forth from a woman whose belly was cut open upon her death.³² We will later return to this point.

A witch-doctors' seance was a true public spectacle, with frantic, wild dancing to the beat of drums, a singing chorus, and amazing feats all of which never failed to attract a crowd. Several witch-doctors gathered together at the homestead of the host

²⁵ Ibid., p. 257.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 149. Cf. also pp. 488-90.

²⁷ Ibid. pp. 163-4: "... Moreover, the witch-doctor functions at these seances not only as an oracular agent but also as a fighter against witchcraft, ... by his dances he wages immediate war on witches ... To those present a seance is a very good show which is amusing to watch..." And at p. 258: "[Witch-doctors'] chief value is that they generally clear the atmosphere of witchcraft. ... [J]oint undertaking ... and the interests of a district are at stake... Witch-doctors... act as ritual skirmishers to report on and counter the mystical forces in opposition."

²⁸ Ibid., p. 149.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 51: "The Zande witch-doctor exercises supernatural powers solely because he knows the right medicines and has eaten them in the right manner. His prophecies are derived from the magic inside him. His inspiration does not spring from the Supreme Being nor from the ghosts of the dead. ... He relies on medicines for visions of witchcraft and for indications of direction." Cf. also pp. 178, 205, 211, 227, and 229.

³⁰ Ibid. pp. 159-60, 209-13, 490.

for at least an entire day of dancing and divination. As with oracles, names of possible witches were presented by the client, from which the "witch" was chosen.³³ The dual function of the witch-doctor was reflected in the way he expressed himself during the seance. The manner of his anti-witch declarations was "truculent... overbearing... browbeating... braggart..." Whereas when uttering "prophecies", he used "the voice of a medium who sees and hears something from without... disconnected sentences... a dreamy, far-away voice... like men talking in a trance, or... in their sleep."³⁴ The witch-doctors' "visions" of witchcraft could also come from gazing into water, or a divining pot.³⁵

Perhaps a major underlying *raison d'être* of the witch-doctor is that he alone, during his seances, enacted a "public affirmation of the existence of witchcraft", which, in a society where the only evidence of witchcraft was through oracles, could have been crucial. One could argue, then, that witch-doctors were the physical, concrete evidence of witchcraft, since, after all, witches are not visible as such. Evans-Pritchard sums up well this important ideological rôle of the witch-doctors:

Witch-doctors have always been part of Zande culture. They figure in the oldest traditions of their nation. Their seances occasion one of the few types of social gatherings outside family life, and from an early age children have taken part in them as spectators, chorus, and drummers. Azande do not consider what their world would be like without witch-doctors any more than we consider what it would be like without physicians. Since there is witchcraft there are naturally witch-doctors... A seance of witch-doctors is a public affirmation of the existence of witchcraft. It is one of the ways in which belief in witchcraft is inculcated and expressed.³⁶

It is most interesting to note the several features which are common to both the witch-doctors of the past and the Nagidi of the present.³⁷ They both undergo an initiation involving which can be grossly resumed as successive death, burial, and resurrection. The types of matters for which they are consulted are strikingly similar (one major exception being "homicide"); compare "the situations in which a man might summon witch-doctors to his assistance—sickness, failure in hunting, indecision in agricultural activities, barrenness of wives, social difficulties of various kinds, especially with relatives-in-law and princes" with the examples included above for the Nagidi. They pronounce publicly after long deliberation whether a name placed before them is guilty or innocent of "mystical" wrongdoing. Their decisions are based on "largely unconscious mental activity". They each have a specialized social function; they have prestige, are respected as enactors of "good magic" or morally good judgements. Both witch-doctors and Nagidi function respectively as such only in ritual situations; otherwise they live normal lives, among family and neighbors. They each wage a "battle of two spiritual powers": the witch-doctor between his own magical powers (derived from medicines) and witchcraft; the

³³ Ibid., pp. 154, 158-61, 170-2, 177-206.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 167-70.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 156, 244.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 194.

³⁷ "The Witch-Doctors of the Azande," in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 1, 1901, pp. 1-11.

Nagidi between supernatural powers derived from "God" and witchcraft and sorcery. They each have "acquired" rather than "innate" power (though the source of that power contrasts: eating plants vs. God-given). They each carry out what is perhaps the sole public affirmation of belief in mystical notions. A final link between witch-doctors and modern women "prophetesses" derives from the few myths mentioned above. Madina, a woman who was found living in a hole in the rocks, is said to have founded the corporation of witch-doctors. There was also a woman, Semeni, whose belly was cut open after her death and disclosed several important medicines now used by witch-doctors.

There are also several very important differences between these two personages. The witch-doctor's source of power is "medicines"; Nagidi, on the other hand, receive their power from "God" (and are also sometimes associated with genies and ghosts). Witch-doctors actively fight witchcraft in wild, public spectacles, with dancing, drums, songs, incredible feats, etc.; Nagidi deliberate alone, often isolated from others. Witch-doctors chat and joke among themselves, show no awe or reverence for their magic; Nagidi are religious cult leaders, showing great respect for God and His word, which they in turn reveal to their followers. Witch-doctors never divine about homicide cases,³⁸ and their verdicts are confirmed by oracles; Nagidi can be called on in important cases, including homicide, to confirm or deny what lesser oracles or judges have decided. Witch-doctors always exact payment (indeed, as with all Zande magic, if they are not paid, they will not be effective); the Nagidi ask for no direct payment (though "penance" can involve work for the Nzapa Zande cult). Witch-doctors enact a "public affirmation of belief in witchcraft"; Nagidi affirm a more general belief in mystical notions which seem to be less and less inclusive of witchcraft (*mangu*) *per se*, and more and more "sorcery", and "genies" (such as *a-kpiri*).³⁹

I would like to suggest that the demise of the witch-doctors and the rise of the Nagidi are perhaps two aspects (among others) of a general, ongoing process of change in Zande society, a process which includes (among others), first, an upsurge in magic (as opposed to witchcraft), and second, as was mentioned above, a shift in the Zande notion of *mbori*.

It seems probable that magic has long been increasing in variety and in importance among the Zande. The Zande penchant for borrowing and their interest in foreign things have far from hampered the introduction of foreign magic.⁴⁰ Long before the coming of the Europeans, the Vungara expansion which incorporated numerous foreign peoples was responsible for the introduction of various new

³⁸ Ibid., p. 258.

³⁹ Letters from Zemio often include news of recent *kpiri* (a sort of "man-turned water monster") attacks: "Unfortunately, we have been much saddened by further drownings. In the effort to punish the guilty parties, many innocent persons are suffering in prison" (September 24, 1989, from a missionary, my translation).

⁴⁰ Evans-Pritchard, in *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, speaks of "the curiosity and tolerance Azande express

"medicines". It might even be possible to suggest that, relative to witchcraft (*mangu*), a great deal of Zande magic, in particular "bad" magic (Evans-Pritchard's "sorcery"), is relatively new. This increase in "bad" magic has perhaps been paralleled by a semantic shift. *Ngua*, which properly means plant or tree, refers to all substances or acts which have what we would call magical power.⁴¹ A new opposition seems to be emerging: *dawa* (Arabic for "medicine"), is increasingly employed to refer to only "good" medicinal plants, in contrast to *ngua*, ("bad") poisonous plants. *Mbe-ngua*, "owner of magic", a term which used to be neutral, meaning someone acquainted with medicinal plants and herbs, now has strong negative, even fearsome connotations, and refers almost strictly to "sorcerers".

As Evans-Pritchard remarks, there is no real mythology about the efficacy of medicines and magic⁴²—this is true in particular for "bad" magic. Though the Trickster tales abound with magic, they indeed include only the "good" forms (rain medicine, medicine to open up a rock, to keep a fire from coming near, etc.); there are virtually no allusions to magic used for retribution, vengeance or malevolence.

It would thus be possible to suggest that in Evans-Pritchard's time, many, if not most, "medicines" were borrowed. It must also be pointed out, however, that Evans-Pritchard did his research among the easternmost Zande province, and, perhaps, the least conservative one. His account of the Zande in Gbudwe's province of the 1920s is thus a description of the Zande region where the increase in magic was probably most pronounced, where the clash between witchcraft and witch-doctors, on the one hand, and magicians and sorcerers on the other, was already "upsetting the cart" of Zande beliefs, a situation which may perhaps account for some of the numerous contradictions and discrepancies in Zande explanations of their own phenomena.

It is most difficult, of course, to assign specific causes for the increase in magic in Zandeland. It would be all too easy to simply write it off as resulting from colonial administration. It is reasonable to state, however, that the though changes brought on by colonial administration did not spark the creation of magical means of retribution and punishment, it certainly accelerated, or gave new impulse to, this process. In particular, the closing of the borders, which made the procurement of *benge* difficult, and the breakdown of the princes' authority to decide and punish crimes of witchcraft drastically altered the traditional methods of divination and punishment of witches.⁴³ The princes and their oracles no longer had the final say in the designation and sentencing of witches; the traditional means of witchcraft accusations and vengeance was removed. In this void there seem to have been two reactions: first, a recrudescence of magical means to protect oneself from witchcraft and "sorcerers" (with perhaps increasing emphasis on the latter), to punish witches and "sorcerers", and to wreak vengeance; and, second, which we will not spend time on here, very forcible extortions to bring about confessions of now otherwise unprovable crimes, a

"...The power of medicines lies often in their novelty, a sense of distance and unfamiliarity endowing them with prestige... [T]here is a tendency to attribute all medicines to conquered and foreign peoples..." (pp. 445-6)

phenomenon attested by Evans-Pritchard⁴⁴ and also by my own informants in the Central African Republic.

The decline of the authority of the Vungara princes and their *benge* under colonial rule thus seems to have played a part in the recrudescence of new magical means, including those of "secret societies", both for protective and for punitive measures.⁴⁵ Evans-Pritchard summarized the rôle of colonial influence in the increase of magic:

...Many other of their medicines have been borrowed within the memory of living man. The process continues today probably partly because an era of peace has favoured diffusion; partly because the power of medicines lies often in their novelty, a sense of distance and unfamiliarity endowing them with prestige; and partly because many legal and moral sanctions have been replaced by magical ones. Thus vengeance can now only be accomplished by magical means. Also men who would have brought cases in which they had a claim for redress before the princes in the old days, but who cannot obtain redress in present-day courts for various reasons, either must abandon all hope of restitution or trust to magic to obtain it. Indeed, European governments have themselves become objects and agents of magic; for protective medicines are often asked to guard their owners against imprisonment and punitive medicines are often asked to bring imprisonment on wrongdoers. In fact, far from magical practices having diminished since European conquest, all evidences point to a remarkable increase of medicines. Belief in witchcraft, oracles, and magic seems to be as strong as ever it was, and even among the younger generation there is no marked tendency to discard the faith of their fathers.⁴⁶

Just as calamity and failure are attributed to mystical wrongdoing, so is success attributed to special magic. Evans-Pritchard observed that "great success in an undertaking is an indication of the possession of powerful medicines... [Zande] are inclined to attribute unusual success to magic..."⁴⁷ Nowadays, perhaps even more than ever, success is due to magic. A good harvest, a successful hunt, an excellent grade on an exam, a promotion, are all attributed to magic. It would even be possible to speculate a possible relationship between an increase in magic and an increase in social and economical inequality.

Returning to our discussion of witch-doctors, though Evans-Pritchard suggests other reasons for their decline (i.e., they gradually became too densely concentrated, in part due to imposed government settlements,⁴⁸ it is possible to suggest that on the whole their demise corresponds to an increase in the individual use of magic for personal retribution and vengeance. But vengeance magic in itself cannot fulfill the functions of the witch-doctors. Whereas witch-doctors were collective fighters of

⁴³ Ibid., p. 128: "British rule... does not permit direct vengeance on a witch, nor accept the legality of paying compensation for an imaginary crime... But today a witch is never accused of a crime ... All is vagueness and confusion." Cf. also p. 322.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 267-8.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 513: "In so far as the magic of the [secret] associations is not redundant it is directed against the vagaries of European rule. Azande, faced with a power they can neither stand up against nor avoid, have found in magic their last defence. New situations demand new magic, and European rule which is responsible for the new situations has opened up roads into neighbouring countries which can supply the new magic."

⁴⁶ Ibid. pp. 445-6. Cf. also p. 467.

witchcraft, "generally... magical actions concern only the welfare of an individual."⁴⁹ Witch-doctors were patronized by the princes, while "princes and courtiers... are even contemptuous of much of the magic in Zande culture".⁵⁰ Witch-doctors inspired admiration, and had much prestige, but "magicians have no great prestige in Zande society."⁵¹ The witch-doctors dance was a common, if not required, event prior to collective undertakings, whereas "magic is seldom an essential part of a social activity."⁵²

Thus, the gap left by the decline of the witch-doctors was not filled by magic. It is all the more interesting, therefore, that these are some of the very areas in which witch-doctors and Nagidi share common features. Nagidi fight against Evil (witchcraft and "sorcery") through their religious teachings. They do not act in secret, but hold a sort of "public seance" during which belief in mystical notions are confirmed. They hold great prestige. Through prayer and ritual during religious services, they offer collective prayers for the common good. Finally, besides dealing with lesser matters such as continued failure in hunting, barrenness, etc., they offer public trials for witchcraft and sorcery.

The second major change accompanying the rise of the Nagidi occurred more gradually, and, it would seem, almost imperceptibly: the shift in the notion of *mbori*, a word often translated by "Supreme Being" or "God". In the past, *a-toro* (ghosts) and *mbori* (Supreme Being) seem to have been associated; they were spooky notions, to be appealed to, to be appeased, to be feared in the event of transgressions.

There can be no doubt that Azande do not clearly distinguish between the Supreme Being and the ghosts of the dead when performing the ceremony and that they think of them both together as the object of their ritual.⁵³

Furthermore, "both *mbori* and *a-toro* are associated with heads of streams."⁵⁴ Even today, elderly informants, though well aware that *mboli* was not the Christian "God" he is nowadays, give confusing accounts as to what he actually was. In examining utterances in which the term appears (especially in texts dating from the 1920s), it becomes obvious that pre-Christian *mbori* was not a personified moral source, nor

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 424.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 425.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 428.

⁵² Ibid. p. 434. If the witch-doctor no longer dances his dance of divination (*a-vure*) in Zande villages, we can at least be consoled by the fact that he lives on in the Trickster tales. Several (if not most!) of the Trickster tales incorporate the characteristics and behavior and legends of witch-doctors, though modern (especially young) narrators are ignorant of the past existence of witch-doctors. For example, Evans-Pritchard says that according to the little existing mythology concerning witch-doctors, Madina's (the founder of witch-doctors' corporation) son Nzoropoi caused birds to fall about him like rain by his dancing and singing. The story involving Yangaima (Evans-Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967; Gore, Mrs. E.C., *Sangba Ture*, London: Sheldon Press, 1954; Lagae, C.R. and V.H. Vanden Plas, *La Langue des Azande*, Bruxelles: Veritas, 1921; and my own versions) relates the exact same event, but in the form of a typical Trickster tale. Ture the Trickster's very appearance corresponds almost point by point with descriptions of ancient witch-doctors, complete with feathered hat, hide-bag, anklets, horns, and his exploits are often those described for witch-doctors (in particular, the dance of divination). Perhaps this cycle of tales would be better understood if the old institution of witch-doctors were taken into account. And perhaps the reverse is also true: by "reading" these tales with an interest in their mythological and legendary aspect, perhaps we could get a better glimpse the past world of the Zande witch-doctors

omnipresent, nor omniscient. The word took the non-human animate pronoun *ru*, could be pluralized, and was used with both principal forms of Zande "possessive": *ga*, and *se* (used, for example, with body part terms), the use of which reflects the attributes of the notion referred to. *Mbori* (like the *a-toro*, or "ghosts") could not be a moral, impartial judge: the "Supreme Being ... [was a] vague influence... not cited ... as the guardian of moral law."⁵⁵ The word, in its pre-missionary contexts, could as easily (or more easily!) have been translated by "fate" or some such impersonal equivalent.⁵⁶

With the Christian missionaries, and their ideological offspring, the Nzapa Zande sect, *mbori* takes on the meaning of a Christian "God". Only now has "God" become *ko* (he), rather than *ru* (it), a personified, morally good, impartial, omnipresent, omniscient supreme being; a "Christian" God, in other words, who can see into a person's soul and know whether or not he has committed an evil act. Furthermore, with the Christian religion and the notions of God and sin and personal redemption, we find that free will and individual responsibility for acts is emphasized.

The emergence of "prophetesses" can be seen as both a development of existing Zande spiritual ideoms and an innovation of Christianity. The death-burial-resurrection experience which bequeaths new powers of insight is something the Zande were already familiar with, not only as something sought (as with the *binza*) but as something unbidden (as with the *a-ira-toro* and the *a-ira-gbirisa*). A concern with reavealing "bad" actions and reaffirming public notions of "good" behaviour was also present in the activities of the witch-doctors. What has changed is the nature of the source of inspiration, and here the Christian transformation of *mbori* to the omniscient, morally good God has facilitated the development of figures who, like those early Christian prophets inspired by the Holy Spirit, can see into the human soul and see evil. That those with the new gift of prophecy are women rather than men is also partly explicable through the old idioms associated with "ghost diviners".

In closing, I can but offer a general proposition, perhaps worthy of pursuit. Zande diviners, particularly witch-doctors, belonged to a society in which belief in witchcraft was first and foremost. It seems that nowadays there is an upsurge of magic and magical beings which vie with, or even displace, witchcraft *per se*, at least as can now be observed in actual, individual accusations. The activities of witch-doctors, diviners and fighters against witchcraft, are collective. The threat of witchcraft is a collective concern; witch-doctors act for the common good, in a public setting; they "clear the air of witchcraft". Magic, on the contrary, and especially the newer forms of punitive, vindictive magic, is carried out through private actions, for individual pursuits. In a very small nutshell, witch-doctors sought

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 110.

⁵⁶ Evans-Pritchard, in his personal, annotated copy of *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Zande*, systematically replaced "supernatural" with "mystical", as though he wished to remain as vague as the Zande with regard to the notion of *mbori*. One could go even farther and suggest that, not only is the concept of a god-like Supreme Being a fairly new concept for the term *mbori*, but that the term itself was borrowed relatively recently. This would account for its often being confused with "genies" and ghosts, its appearing

to keep things from happening, whereas ("bad") magic seeks to make things happen. Furthermore, the Christian religion (and, in many important ways, the Nzapa Zande of the Nagidi) including an omniscient God and a focus on free will and individual responsibility for acts, seems to be at direct odds with witchcraft and the world of witch-doctors, who were involved in collective prevention and revelation rather than individual retribution.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Eric de Dampierre, *Un Ancien Royaume Bandia* (Paris: Plon, 1967), has discussed the relationship between diviners and prophets among neighboring Ngbangi peoples:

“The prophet appears under two aspects: that of universal wife-giver and that of witch-fighter. In the latter role, he tends to take the place of witch-doctors, whose shamanistic ritual he ceases to perform, thus removing the need for a public. In both these roles, the face of the individual, the new man, pierces through” (p. 567, my translation).

There is a negative correlation between the presence of diviners and oracles in a society and the advent of prophets. (pp. 568-9, my translation).

These observations have further discussion