

SOCI 422: SOCIETIES AND CULTURES OF AFRICA

Session 10 – Witchcraft and the Social Structure of Azande

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Session Overview

Introduction

Belief in witchcraft a supernatural entity influences social relations in African societies and elsewhere in the developing worlds. While it destroys families in some societies, it rather has a functional aspect in Azande where everybody is a potential witch. This session discusses the role of witchcraft in Azande and more particularly how it affects the social structure of the society.

Objectives

At the end of this session, students should be able to:

- identify the location of the Azande in Africa;
- explain the Azande understanding of witchcraft
- describe how the Azande think one becomes a witch
- articulate the role witchcraft plays in the social structure of Azande

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in this session are as follow:

- Topic One: The Location of Azande in Africa
- Topic Two: Azande understanding of witchcraft
- Topic Three: Becoming a witch in Azande
- Topic Four: Witchcraft and the social structure

Reading List

- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1937), *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Nukunya, G. K. (2016), *Tradition and Change in Ghana: An Introduction to Sociology*, Accra: Woeli Publishing Services

Topic one: The Azande and Their Location

- The Azande are located in the centre of Africa, South-Western Sudan and to the North of Zaire, they are also to the east of Central African Republic
- The people lived at river banks and were scattered autonomous groups;
- Their settlements were scattered because they believed witchcraft was very effective at close range;
- Sudanese authorities forced them to relocate close to roads due to presence of tsetsefly at river banks;

The Azande and Their Location

- Disputes between the people were settled within clans; while inter-clan dispute was settled by elders from each group;
- Though scattered, the people were unified by Avongara a man of wisdom and kindness who rose from the group;
- Under the Avongara more than 50 different groups were conquered and amalgamated into one Azande group;
- They came under British rule by the early 20th century;

The Azande and their Location

- The people have two seasons: wet and dry;
- They practised cultivation of maize, millet, gourd, manioc, bananas, groundnut and beans;
- They domesticated chicken and dogs;
- Streams and rivers abound in Azande and central to their social life;
- Distance was estimated by streams crossed;
- Rivers were used to state birth place;

The Azande and their Location

- The Azande fish during the dry season when streams are low using basket traps in the rapids of the running water;
- Women also dammed streams into small shallow pools and drained them to collect fishes and snakes;
- The termite is a favourite food for the Azande for its high fat and protein content;

Becoming a Witch & Witchcraft in Azande

- Belief in witchcraft is very pervasive among the Azande but the people cannot say much about what its meant to them;
- The philosophy about witchcraft is explicit but not seen as a doctrine to them;
- To them, witchcraft is a physical property residing in individuals unconsciously;
- Witchcraft is inherited from one's parents – the son inherits from the father and the daughter from the mother;

Becoming a Witch & Witchcraft in Azande

- At pregnancy the souls of the parents compete between themselves and if the father has a more powerful soul the conceived child would be a boy and vice versa;
- If the parent with a more powerful soul is a witch then the new born child is also a witch;
- A child's witchcraft is small and can harm only the peers or younger children with minor injuries;
- An older witch is more powerful and dangerous;

Becoming a Witch & Witchcraft in Azande

- Witchcraft is deployed with sheer will-power;
- As a witch sleeps at night, his/her soul is elsewhere causing havoc – spiritually eating flesh and internal organs of their intended victims;
- Witchcraft is seen as the cause of all misfortunes great or small;
- For instance, if the kiln of a porter cracks, or a child stubs a toe at play, or a hunter is gored by an elephant, witchcraft is responsible;
- No death or misfortune is accidental;

Becoming a Witch & Witchcraft in Azande

- Despite all these convictions the Azande do not live in constant terror of witches;
- Evans-Pritchard assessed the Azande as the most carefree people of Sudan;
- The Azande is rather terrified being a victim of embezzlement than a victim of bewitchment;
- Jealousy, envy and hatred among others can lead to bewitchment;
- A victims, therefore, searches for a suspect among those he/she has argued with or are envious of him/her;

Becoming a Witch & Witchcraft in Azande

- The Azande looks for the aggressor (witch) through oracular consultations;
- But they also consult oracles for reasons other than exposing a witch;
- The oracles are the rubbing – board, termite and *benge* (poison) oracles;
- With rubbing-board, a slimy substance from a climber plant is spread over a carved board with a short stick rubbed on it;

Becoming a Witch & Witchcraft in Azande

- Order is given to the oracle to expose either the accuser or the accused by the stick getting stuck to the board;
- Depending on the nature of the order given, the guilty is exposed;
- With the termite oracle, two special sticks are planted on the termite hill representing the accuser and the accused with an order given for the guilty's stick to be eaten up by the termite;

Becoming a Witch & Witchcraft in Azande

- The benge consists of poison from a plant squeezed into the beak of a fowl presented for the ordeal;
- If the fowl dies depending on the instruction given, the one culpable is declared guilty;
- The instruction may be that if the accused is really guilty of bewitching the accuser, the fowl should die and the same order is reversed to mean that the fowl should survive the poison;
- The one found guilty compensates the innocent one;

Witchcraft and the Social Structure

- The Azande recognize that witchcraft plays some functional roles in their society;
- For instance, the *benge* is an expensive oracle which the poor cannot patronize;
- However, one's rich relation can deputize for poor member of the family who accuses or is accused;
- This enforces good relationship among family members since any one of them may have the opportunity to accuse someone or be rather accused and may have to face the *benge* oracle which is the final of the oracles and its verdict must be respected ;

Witchcraft and the Social Structure

- The Azande is a non-centralized society with princes called the Avongara;
- The *benge* oracle is lodged with the Avongara so as to enable them be respected in such an acephalous society;
- The Avongara who administer this oracle are immune to witchcraft accusations;
- This enables them to effectively preside over witchcraft matters in the society;

Witchcraft and the Social Structure

- Marriage in Azande is not a straight-forward transaction when a man expresses interest in a woman;
- Oracles are consulted in the process of courtship to find out if the marriage will be devoid of witchcraft manipulations;
- The consciences of the parties are searched by the oracles before the marriage contract is approved or disapproved;

Witchcraft and the Social Structure

- Due to the presence of witchcraft in Azande, moral code of behaviour is high, since any misfortune cannot be carelessly blamed on anyone suspected to be responsible;
- This is because the accusation is investigated by the oracles and wrong accusation is punished;
- This way the Azande constantly searches his/her conscience before laying any blame on anyone so as to avoid being guilty of false accusation;

Witchcraft and the Social Structure

- In Azande, everyone is a potential witch and this enables the people to conduct their affairs well so as to be associated with benevolent witchcraft other than malevolent witchcraft;

Summary

- Azande is a witchcraft prone society but the people are not in constant fear of bewitchment;
- In the case of any accusation, oracles are consulted for the truth to be known;
- Witches, therefore, do not strike with impunity else they are exposed;
- Although known as acephalous society, their Avongara's orders are obeyed because they control the highest oracle of the land;
- Witchcrafts also fosters good relationship among family members as they may need each other at the tribunal of the *benge* oracle.