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From Zanzeland to Washington DC: Timeless Anxieties, Familiar Challenges

“New Situations Demand New Magic...”¹

In *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*, E.E. Evans Pritchard analyzes a society which is broadly characterized by unchanging traditions. However, various events that are out of the immediate control of the Azande occur. When that happens, its subjects are forced to make qualitative and quantitative observations which redefine their position, the way they interact with each other and, ultimately, how they attempt to preserve their existing modes of understanding of in order to convey what are in fact radically changing conditions. This is an uneven process, not devoid of contradictions in which personal and communal anxieties play a defining role in the social space, in which the Azande operate as a community. At a first look, though admirable for its relative social cohesion, the world of the Azande appears to be strikingly different from the one we inhabit. After all, we have different social norms, priorities and ways of acting upon the world, not to mention the fact that we live in a very different historical moment. However, seen from a different perspective, while the history of the Azande is distinct from our own in the West, when we analyze the historical processes of socio-political and economic changes that both the Azande and the people in America experience we notice some interesting similarities. In this essay, I argue that by studying Evans Pritchard’s work on the Azande we can detect patterns of organizing behavior that can shed some light on how people from our own society, the America of the 21st century, interpret and react to the unavoidable succession of events that out of our control. I also argue that by virtue of our similarities, the Azande and the

¹ E.E. Pritchard, quoted in Jean and John Comaroff, *Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African postcolony*, *American Ethnologist* 26(2), 1999;

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Americans have similar ways of reacting to the unknown. Consequently, the story of the Azande could in fact inform and allow us to overcome some of the obstacles we in America are currently facing.

In the history of the Azande, the transition from a small-scale, autonomous form of organization to a larger, integrated social and political system was an event of great importance, as the Azande were forced to reevaluate their role and existence within a much larger project. Their unilateral focus on their own community required a major shift as they were no longer only related to their peers and community but to other actors and series of events which they could not fully control. Not only could they not control everything that was happening to them, but the Azande were also unable to stop the social transformation from taking place, though they were not in fact concerned with it. One then asks oneself, is that significantly different from what we experience in the United States, one century later? Aren't traditional institutions also changing and we have no power to control or contain them? Do concepts of marriage and family have the same values and meanings that our community attributed to them only twenty years ago? Is the economy, a force and structure that we were once so confident in, enjoying the same consideration and faith now as it did four-five years ago? Something has changed even if the actors were the same and even if we pretend that it didn't. The story of the Azande suggests that what changes is our ability to control the events and phenomena that we once *thought* we mastered and perhaps to some extent we did. In the process, we generate new explanations that allow us to regain control at least at a discursive level over what is happening to us.

We, as a community, just like the Azande, will not simply accept social change but try to tame it, control it or at least rationalize and explain it in the terms that we see fit. Let's take the example of the American economy and see how our behavior changed in the past few years and ask a critical question: what is that change indicative of? The economy is an invisible force. We cannot point to its material origin but we can feel its effects. If the economy performs as expected, we, as a community, prosper. In recent times, due to the global economic climate, our lives have been negatively impacted

by a series of economic shocks that have directly affected our existence. This is something the Azande have also experienced throughout history and the term used by Pritchard to explain the social phenomenon and the effects this force had on people is “witchcraft”. As it turns out, “witchcraft” might be to the Azande what “economy” is to us. From Adam Smith onwards, many economists, politicians and in general educated people look at the economy and think of the invisible hand, the force that guides the free market capitalism. Basically, Adam Smith had this to say about the invisible hand:

By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an **invisible hand** to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was not part of it.²

Let’s look at a passage from Pritchard’s work and simply replace the word “witchcraft” with “economy” and “Azande” with “people living in America”. As we will notice, an apparently distinct world will become strangely familiar:

I had no difficulty in discovering what Azande think about witchcraft, nor in observing what they do to combat it. These ideas and actions are on the surface of their life and are accessible to anyone who lives for a few weeks in their homesteads. [...] There is no need to question Azande about it, for information flows freely from recurrent situations in their social life, and one has only to watch and listen. [...] [W]itchcraft was one of the first words I heard in Zanzeland, and I heard it uttered day by day throughout the months.³

For the Azande, witchcraft was and most likely still is a form of sociality, the means by which people interacted with each other. Today, the economy is on everyone’s mind and it expresses a series of anxieties that we all have with respect to our present and future. In addition, we also mention it on a daily basis and we are worried about its implications and course of action. But most importantly, the economy, just like witchcraft, is fairly consistent with human responsibility.⁴ In America, we have not simply blamed the economy for our personal misfortunes. Before reaching the point in which we attributed our bad luck and economic hardships to the economic climate, we took the conventional path so familiar to the Azande. We tried to live our lives, carry on with our economic exchanges and we did, in fact, followed and implemented the same techniques that we successfully used before the

² Adam Smith, *Wealth Of Nations*, Book IV, Chapter 2, Prometheus Books (December 1991) p. 487,

³ E.E. Evans Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, And Magic Among the Azande*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, p. 1

⁴ Pritchard, p.30

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economic crisis. When those failed we attributed our hardships to the economy. Is that in any ways different from the Zande's attempt to use witchcraft as a way of explaining "why bad things happened to good people?" Are we not trying to negotiate our differences and our sudden and unexpected change in our social and economic lives by attributing what is happening to us to an external force on which we have absolutely no control but which we are forced to acknowledge and respect?

The story of the Azande is not only indicative of our relation to the economy but also of an even more critical aspect in our lives. In writing *Witchcraft, Oracles, And Magic Among the Azande*, Pritchard was concerned with what he wittingly identified as a paradox: how is it possible that people who are clearly intelligent, rational and pragmatic often resort to ideas and beliefs that fail any empirical test? Pritchard goes ahead and settles this paradox by arguing that the Azande use witchcraft as a defense mechanism. Witchcraft allows them to not only explain unfortunate events in their lives but also protect their core beliefs from being rejected. In practice, the Azande rule out events that threaten or undermine their fundamental beliefs about the world they inhabit.⁵ That is precisely what we, in the United States, do when we think of the effects of the economic crisis and the rogue global economic trends. By attributing our misfortunes to external factors – the economy, the careless bankers, the aggressive investment bankers and consultants etc – we rule out the other possibility which could potentially contest our most basic beliefs. China, an authoritarian state, managed to avoid the economic crisis until very recently and they are most likely going to get out of the economic recession ahead of us but under no circumstances will we ever consider being a part of a tyrannical state. South Africa, another protectionist state has also limited the negative effects on their economy by allowing the state to play a very prominent role in the economy. We wouldn't and perhaps we shouldn't consider that alternative either. But this shows a clear pattern which should not go unnoticed.

⁵ Professor Jean Comaroff makes this argument in a convocation speech titled "The Uses of "Ex-centricity": Cool Reflections from Hot Places"

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We blame the economy for what is happening to us because otherwise we might have to question sensitive issues that could affect the way we see the world. Put differently, if we didn't have the economy to invoke as a cause of our misfortunes – this witchcraft of the West – what would we think of concepts so dear to us like democracy, neo-liberalism, trade or state deregulation? And if we were to question those concepts, wouldn't the consequences be more detrimental to our well-being as a whole? In other words, isn't it perhaps better to hold the economy responsible for our misfortunes than to question the most fundamental sets of rights and beliefs in our lives, which are so valuable and precious to us?

The last comparison between the two worlds that I would like to make here is related to our similarity in how and by what means we try to reconcile the cause and effect of the events that affect us directly. We all do that by resorting to an authority that is expected to mediate our differences and restore our well-being. The Azande empowered a witch-doctor with that mission. We, on the other hand, chose the state to fulfill that mission. According to E.E.Pritchard:

The Zande witch-doctor is both diviner and magician. As diviner he exposes witches; as magician he thwarts them. [...] As a diviner he discovers the location of witchcraft, and as a leech he repairs its ravages.⁶

In America, we identified the economy as being the problem and we are seeking a remedy. Some argue that this remedy should come from the private sector, but many believe the state should play a role in it. Perhaps in a Zande context, this debate would be on whether the problem could be solved directly through consultation among various members of the community or if the mediation should be conducted by a higher authority. In the United States, we hope that the Obama administration will make the right choices that will put the economy back on track. Just like the Azande, we have reached a point in which we look up to the higher authority that we entrusted with our well-being, and we are waiting for the direly needed solution. And many of us hope that no matter what decisions the state will make, we will once again be allowed to prosper and go on with our lives.

⁶ E.E.Pritchard 66

The world of the Azande is as complicated and contradictory as ours is. Independent of the decisions people take and how they attempt to solve their problems, both Westerners and the Azande are trying to minimize and limit the detrimental external effects that shape their social and personal lives as members of a given community. Arguably, there are many things that set the Americans and the Azande apart. In this essay I focused on the similarities between the two worlds, but this does imply that I do not acknowledge the differences and variations that differentiate us.

Both the Azande and the people living in this country have a similar way of acting upon the world when they feel that they are losing control over some of the events that influence their lives. Which is, in fact, why Pritchard's astute observation that "new situations require new magic" still stands. In practice, we all tend to hang to our existing beliefs and almost naturally denounce everything that challenges our predisposed assumptions about the world. In this process, both Azande and us develop a faith and trust in experts or oracles of one sort or another. When in trouble, the Azande resort to witchdoctors but we also did the same when we requested the beliefs of other types of "diviners" such as economists, professors, economic consultants, and so on. When these actors failed we blamed the professional segments that these "diviners" came from and the institutions they represented: banks, governments, consultancy firms. By doing so, what we tried to avoid most (and succeeded in doing so) was what makes the Azande so similar to the people living in America: we blamed individual events instead of questioning the system of beliefs (i.e. finance capital) that these actors represent.

Lastly, by studying the Azande, we can perhaps retain our hope for a better future. The Azande experienced structural transformations that threatened the very social fabric of their societies. They managed to overcome the extremely difficult obstacle in their lives, i.e. the transition from an enclosed society to a social cell that was part of a much larger political and economic project. In the 21st century America, we are all researchers limited by our temporal orientation as *subjects* of the world we wish to

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study which clearly brings along a series of limitations and contradictions. However, by studying the Azande, we might just find the answers and the strength to overcome what is after all the most challenging obstacle in our recent times. And the fact that others have succeeded should at least allow us to hope that we will too.