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Institutionalizing Accident

> "A moment earlier the regularity had been broken by a sudden oblique movement: something had spun round, skidding sideways—the abrupt braking, as it appeared, of a heavy truck, which was now stranded with one wheel on the edge of the pavement. In an instant, like bees round the entrance to their hive, people had collected round a little island of space in their midst. The driver, who had climbed down from his seat, stood there, grey as packing-paper, gesticulating crudely, explaining how the accident had happened."
>
> —ROBERT MUSIL, 'THE MAN WITHOUT QUALITIES'

I. Evans-Pritchard and His Followers

The anthropological study of witchcraft-as-we-know-it today began with the books of the American Clyde Kluckhohn and the Englishman E. E. Evans-Pritchard, but particularly the latter. Kluckhohn's work on the Navajo was important in showing the logic of witchcraft beliefs and their social place, but it did not set off an increasingly coherent line of interpretation and further study. The contrary was the case in Britain and the academic world centered on it. Reading Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic among the Azande* in 1937 when it was published, however, one might not have predicted what followed. The section of Evans-Pritchard's book that is anthologized in America and that is taught in introductory anthropology classes concerns the explanation of misfortune. Witchcraft explains what otherwise would be accident and as such would be inexplicable. Evans-Pritchard's followers were more concerned to show the place of witchcraft accusations in social life than to demonstrate the logic of witchcraft beliefs. As John Middleton and E. H. Winter noted, Kluckhohn and Evans-Pritchard elucidated "the logic of wizardry," but left un-

developed "the problem of explaining particular forms taken by beliefs in wizardry, and the problem of the relationship of these ideas to the social structure."[1] Evans-Pritchard, they said, made a cultural study. What was needed and which, by the time they wrote, had already developed, was "a sociological explanation," which they believed had the advantage of making comparison and verification of results possible.[2] This was seen as a natural step forward suggested by certain sections of *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Mary Douglas, at least, read Evans-Pritchard as describing "how a metaphysical system could compel belief by a variety of self-validating procedures."[3] Douglas, like other British social anthropologists, thought this would be better posed as a problem in the sociology of knowledge. Finding the social functions of the beliefs, one could account for their persistence and, to a degree, their form. She gives as an example work done by the anthropologists Clyde Mitchell and Max Marwick: a village reaches a size larger than its resources will permit, and witchcraft accusations become the "idiom in which the painful process of fission could be set going."[4] In this Durkheimian thinking, there is an underlying reality, "society," and in particular, social tension, which is reflected in a particular idiom. Witchcraft is an idiom of conflict, reproducing, or perhaps representing, conflicts which exist in the structure of society.

The British school produced sophisticated studies showing in admirable detail how social processes worked. Its very success, however, led to a difficulty. Mary Douglas: "Wherever belief in witchcraft was found to flourish, the hypothesis that accusations would tend to cluster in niches where social relations were ill defined and competitive could not fail to work, because competitiveness and ambiguity were identified by means of witch accusations."[5] One could always find social tensions, perhaps because they always exist. Witchcraft, in this view, was a way of making them visible. Marwick, for instance, notes that "the divining situation [in which the witch is identified] is important sociologically since it is during the divination that vague feelings of tension are organized and formulated into a belief that a particular person is responsible for a particular misfortune."[6] This brings him close to Lévi-Strauss's notion that vague suspicions, otherwise inexpressible, are consolidated and brought to expression in witchcraft accusations, giving the community a coherence that, till that point, it lacked. The difference remained, however, that the first were "vague feel-

ings of [social] tension," the social being at the base, whereas little about social tension appears in Lévi-Strauss.

Mary Douglas's criticism suggested that if these suspicions pointed to underlying social tensions, it could never be verified by the methods anthropologists followed. Nonetheless, she remained convinced that a better method would reveal the relation between witchcraft belief and social conflict. For her, the formulation of Lévi-Strauss could be at best a starting point. Indeed, in her telling survey of witchcraft studies, published in 1970 in honor of Evans-Pritchard and in particular of *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, she does not mention Lévi-Strauss's essay, published in English in 1963 and in French in 1949.[7] Witchcraft pointed to social tension; the problem was to establish the relation between the two in a verifiable way.

For his part, Lévi-Strauss was not interested in a correlation between social tensions and witchcraft accusations. He had moved a step beyond, or at least away, from Durkheim, looking at the linguistic character of accusations. His point was that, regardless of the social and political situation surrounding them, charges of sorcery had to be seen as first of all linguistic in character, or, at least, as a mode of thinking modeled on language. In their basic functioning, witchcraft accusations were not motivated by a situation whose reality could be independently expressed by the anthropologist.

Lévi-Strauss's essay had the strange effect of making witchcraft functional in a way quite different from function understood by British social anthropologists. For Lévi-Strauss, witchcraft confirmed and even established a community. Where there were only vague sentiments shared between people, their articulation promoted not merely shared understandings but shared investment in objects and words beyond their conventional meanings. However, from the point of view of anthropologists who worked for long periods in societies, Lévi-Strauss's approach had the disadvantage that it said nothing about the workings of society outside the moment of witchcraft accusations. From Lévi-Strauss's perspective, to show the motivation of symbols of witchcraft would be to take a false trail. He wanted to explain the power of signification when no particular signification ensues and yet a symbol, necessarily incomprehensible, is formed. It is around such odd symbols that articulation takes place as such and that,

beginning with structural (Saussurian-Jakobsonian) linguistics, one sees a power deriving from the very capacity to form signs rather than to refer to already constituted meanings. As such, Lévi-Strauss said little that was of help to social anthropologists who were interested in the daily workings of the societies they studied. One had to wait for his ideas to pass through those of Jacques Lacan for them to come back to social anthropology in the work of people such as Janet Favret-Saada and Vincent Crapanzano, to name only two.

In Lévi-Strauss, witchcraft accusations center on signs which must remain incomprehensible. The incongruity of such signs to the cultures in which they are found produces the witch. The power of the witch is an anti-social power. But the revelation of this power, instead of upsetting social life, becomes its basis. The Zuni witch seen by Lévi-Strauss is an ordinary Zuni who is revealed to be someone entirely different from his fellows by virtue of his relation to the power that inheres in these signs. And yet this otherness, though initially thought harmful, turns out to be valuable, at least as Lévi-Strauss understood it. The "truth" of sorcery, à la Lévi-Strauss, was more important than justice, which meant that the person of the witch was left unharmed as, around an initial incoherent suspicion, a communal voice formed itself. The difference between the witch and the community is forgotten as the "truth" of sorcery becomes the focal point of social formation and renewal and a "truth," initially foreign to the community, is incorporated into it.

In the analyses of British social anthropologists, accusations of sorcery revealed points where social life was upset already. But, as in the example given by Max Marwick, the result is social integration. Fission is necessary for demographic reasons. It must take place. Witchcraft accusations allow it to do so and thus allow East African societies to work once more. The social system needs conflict and thus needs witchcraft to change latent conflict into action. Witchcraft is thus integrated into society not as harmfully disruptive aggression (on the part of either the witch or the witch hunters) but as disruptive aggression which is useful, perhaps necessary, and which should not be thought foreign to the constitution of the societies involved. As in the Lévi-Straussian explanation, it is not a question of suppressing a force thought disruptive and harmful but rather of looking at the system as such and thus understanding that a force, either the need

to articulate what one only feels one knows or unconsolidated feelings of enmity, needs expression. Disruptive secret power, contrary to ethics, contrary to the social, is in fact needed. Witchcraft, by definition a foreign power, not belonging to the approved sources of social power, contrary to the good, nonetheless functions for the good. Its foreignness is thus domesticated. It is a short step to the thoughts of Steve Biko on the subject.

In the wake of World War II, historians, notably H. R. Trevor-Roper and Norman Cohn, studied European witchcraft in order to find the devastating sources of conflict in Europe.[8] On the other hand, anthropologists posited the exchange of truth for justice outside of Europe. Only in these ways could witchcraft escape its reputation as harmful and even lethal. The cost was that the sources of fear and violence that historians found in Europe were largely neglected.[9] Looking in retrospect at studies which served their times very well and which also advanced our understanding of social processes, nevertheless one wants to ask if there could not have been another path, one that opened onto the sources of disruption without denial of their consequences.[10] And one wants to know also how it was that witchcraft could function without violence and accommodate, if not integrate, impulses antithetical to social life. An answer is contained in Evans-Pritchard's study. I want to look back at his book and ask about paths of explanation left aside as functionalism took its course and as the structuralist approach was little advanced. Accident, we have already seen in the Introduction, is at the beginning of Evans-Pritchard's explanation. Much of Azande life functioned around the attempt to incorporate accident into the daily. To expect the unexpected, to know that one cannot anticipate it, to have conventional ways of reacting to it when it occurs; these are themes one finds in Evans-Pritchard's description of the Azande.

II. Magic Versus Trauma

"If a man develops leprosy and there is a history of incest in his case then incest is the cause of leprosy and not witchcraft."[11] But when there seems to be no recourse to the breaking of conventions or laws, then the reason for an event is witchcraft. Witchcraft, as all anthropologists know from reading the most quoted section of Evans-Pritchard's study, explains misfortune. Which means that while what we term natural causes

for events are not denied, the reason that something happened to a certain person at a particular time is accounted for in a way that naturalistic explanations could not. Thus, says Evans-Pritchard, his old friend Ongasi was injured by an elephant while out hunting. The reason is witchcraft, in part because the question posed is not how the elephant hurt the man, but "Why he and not someone else? Why on this occasion and not on other occasions? Why by this elephant and not by other elephants?" (69). And in his most famous example, a granary collapses while people are sitting beneath it. "There is nothing remarkable about this," he tells us. There are termites at work all the time and eventually granaries, no matter how well made, collapse. But the question is, Why should there have been people underneath it at that moment? It is not unusual for people to sit under granaries to escape the heat. But this does not explain the conjuncture of two trajectories: the ants eating away until the supports are weakened and certain people at a certain moment choosing to sit under just this structure to avoid the heat. "To our minds, the only relationship between these two independently caused facts is their coincidence in time and space. We have no explanation of why the two chains of causation intersected at a certain time and in a certain place, for there is no interdependence between them" (69–70). Azande seek an explanation, whereas we do not, presumably because we cannot.

Witchcraft, it is often said, stops with Descartes. Once there is a notion of a mechanical universe, one ceases to ask unanswerable questions. Or, one might say, the questions that prompt accusations of witchcraft are left unanswered. But it is not true that we simply let the matter go. We understand that we cannot answer the question posed by Azande. But we pose it also, all the same. When, for instance, we are involved in a bad accident, the sign of our being traumatized is precisely that we feel compelled to repeatedly recall the scene of the accident. A similar accident happening to someone unknown to us is less likely to stimulate such memories. If it does, we believe we identify with the person in the scene with ourselves. We might be shocked at seeing an accident that happens to someone else, but if the shock does not produce the same effect it is because we can think of the accident without reliving it. What happened to the person we speak about did not happen to us. We do not worry about why it is the accident occurred. But when we relive the scene as it recurs to us, it is as though the

normal forces that produce an accident—a slippery street, a speeding car, neglecting the red light—are insufficient to explain how it is that "I," in particular, suffered the effect of those forces. There is a singularity about the event when "I" am involved in it. At that point, I say to myself, "If only I had crossed the street one minute sooner," and "Why did I step off the curb just before the light turned red," and so on. I construct another scene, one that did not happen, because while I know that the accident happened to me, I cannot believe it. It is not simply the harmful consequences of the accident that make me feel that way. There may have been none. It might have been only the feeling of a chance event that stimulates in me dread of what might have happened. In reaction to that, I say to myself, "If only . . . ," and in doing so I construct a slight narrative in which nothing happened. I crossed the street. I arrived on the other side without event. There was only the normal course of events in which I made my way through traffic, obeying the laws that regulate circulation as did everyone else. I understand very well that the law is often broken; consequently I look left and right before stepping off the curb. It is not the breaking of the traffic laws that makes the accident abnormal. It is that they were broken in such a way that I became a victim. A victim not merely of negligence and perhaps criminality but a victim of circumstances. In response, in my mind I reconstruct "normality" by contrast to what actually happened to me, or I repeat what occurred. I do so because what I cannot grasp I think of as abnormal. I was in the grip of forces which applied to no one else. Out of this presumed abnormality comes witchcraft.

We have no idiom for expressing such forces. Which is a weak way of saying, in Kantian terms, following Mauss, that no judgment is possible. We cannot judge the nature of the coincidence that occurred. At this point, a term heterogeneous to all judgment appears, according to Mauss. This is "mana," or "power," or, in our case, "witchcraft." As Evans-Pritchard puts it, "What [the Azande] explained by witchcraft were the particular conditions in a chain of causation which related an individual to natural happenings in such a way that they sustained injury" (67). Evans-Pritchard speaks of Zande "philosophy." What he means, I believe, is that witchcraft, as he puts it, "explains *why* events are harmful to man." The sentence continues, " . . . and not *how* they happen" (72).

Witchcraft is not a mistaken science. Perhaps it can be called speculative, as philosophy is also speculative. Not all misfortune is caused by witchcraft, but there seems to be no debate about whether witchcraft is involved in a particular event. The question is put to an oracle and the oracle's message is decisive. Witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard tells us, supplements empirical determination of causes. "The Zande accepts a mystical explanation of the causes of misfortune, sickness, and death, but he does not allow this explanation if it conflicts with social exigencies expressed in law and morals" (75). Other causes are adduced if they are socially relevant. One cannot claim that one lied or committed adultery, for instance, because one was bewitched: "Since Azande recognize plurality of causes, and it is the social situation that indicates the relevant one, we can understand why the doctrine of witchcraft is not used to explain every failure and misfortune. It sometimes happens that the social situation demands commonsense, and not a mystical, judgment of cause" (74). This means that misfortune cannot be accidental. The Azande universe and its "philosophy" rules out interpretations of events that occur for no decipherable reason.

Zande speculation starts from seeing a peculiarity that makes an event not explicable in ordinary terms. Thus, Evans-Pritchard says that "it is the particular and variable conditions of an event and not the general and universal conditions that witchcraft explains. Fire is hot, but it is not hot owing to witchcraft, for that is its nature. It is a universal quality of fire to burn, but it is not a universal quality of fire to burn *you*. This may never happen; or once in a lifetime and then only if you have been bewitched" (69). It is the singular quality of an event that prompts explanations of witchcraft. But Azande [the plural of Zande, the later being both a noun and an adjective] witchcraft is not itself singular. That is, there is not a different power for every event. There is one power, that of witchcraft, though we have seen that among the Zuni, for instance, there are particular objects that are the instruments of that power and that "witchcraft" seems to arise from different places each time. Azande witchcraft explains the particular, the singular even, by reference to a general power. It thus annihilates its singularity; which is to say, it rules out accident. We could at this point say that witchcraft among the Azande institutionalizes accident by making of it a category.

This might be thought to be a simple denial: "there is no accident," no singularity, in which case witchcraft would be merely an ideological

prop. It would be the tool, the belief, the deception necessary to support a denial. But to say this raises certain questions. First, one asks why it is necessary to deny accident. It is not an absolute necessity, as we know. And next one asks why the denial is made with reference to occult power. Is there not more to this notion of occult power than the means of making a denial?

This question about myself as I am found in an inexplicable conjunction of circumstances—termites at work, passing by the granary at a certain time, deciding to stop—divides "me" in two. Compare it, for instance, with a man who comes across someone who bears him a grudge and who decides at that moment to take his revenge. I might curse myself for having taken a walk at that moment and in that place and thus having met my enemy. But I might also simply think about the injustice of the man's view of me or the inappropriateness of him striking me. Questions of "Why?" might not arise, in that case. But if they do arise, "I" find myself in a scene which is larger than one of the encounter of two subjectivities. What I have encountered is something that I do not imagine was controlled by anyone. I see myself, at that moment, from outside myself, shaken out of my own world. At that point, a question of articulation arises. There is something to say, but I do not know what. I cannot account for the event. Saying what happened to me does not account for the event. There is something else to say, but I cannot say it because I cannot grasp it.

This, once again, would be the point of trauma. The point where "I," in particular, cannot say what happened. Where even if "I" can say that in the afternoon, as I was sitting under the granary, it suddenly collapsed, my words feel inadequate. This inadequacy has a strange quality. Traumatized, it means that I relive the experience. In that sense, my words are, in a certain way, more than adequate to describe the event. They even pull it into the present. But they are inadequate because they are not "my" words. If I could describe the accident "in my own words," as we say in English, the "mineness" of the words would locate them at the time of speaking. What they described would be before that. But they are not exactly my words. "I" seem to have no choice. The words I use are as if given to me.

Ordinarily when I relate my experience, I feel that my words reflect what happened to me and that I choose them in order that they might do so. The traumatized person speaks with urgency; his words seem not to be

chosen but to be forced on him. He has to say what happened to him. The words come to him, it seems, automatically, practically indistinguishable in their effect from the event itself. It thus feels as if a power is at work. This force comes into existence just at the point where words fail me because they are not my words. They say what happened, they even bring back the event, but a dimension is missing. The effect is paradoxical. The words issue from my mouth; they describe the event; they embody it. But these words have no authority because they lack a voice. One cannot tell where they came from. It is not merely that they are not "my" words, but they are no one's at all. They are an effect of accident, of the "force," one says, for lack of another term, that is responsible for accident, though, of course, "responsible" is inexact and that is the problem. Between the urgency, which indicates a force, and the naming of that force, there is a gap. My voice is "filled with urgency," one says in English, and yet it is hollow. It is a question of articulation. The articulations lay outside my control. Or, one might say, following our introductory remarks, an unknown third person speaks through me.

The hollowness of my voice is the sound of a power located outside myself. In magic, this power is named; in trauma, it is not. What is at stake is recognizing a power that cannot be recognized in the limited sense of this term. In the crucial moments of magic, one recognizes that one cannot recognize, that events are linked to each other in ways that seem to reveal something one cannot grasp. When magic is culturally sanctioned, the articulation of events comes to be accounted for by it and voice is restored. Exactly what makes words sound hollow without magic, that they are not "my" words, that they are determined from elsewhere, makes them convincing once magic is invoked. Magic, said Mauss, depends on a heterogeneous term, impervious to all logic, and which, for this reason, accounts for linkages where otherwise there is no accountability. And, he stressed, it depends on belief. Here, "belief," however, can not be understood as the credence given in common by members of a society to something they know. Rather, as Derrida points out, it depends on something one does not and cannot know. When this can nonetheless be given a name, there is magic and magic words at work.

III. The Oracle

The person who believes himself bewitched is likely also to think that there are many who hate him. He knows who they are. He consults his oracle. It is at this point that the narrative of accident changes registers. From a story of daily life it becomes a story of magic. Which is to say that it becomes a story, the events of daily life ordinarily remaining outside extended narration. There is then a shift from the first person to the third. The "I" that speaks when I tell you a story becomes "he" when one can speak of a "narrative voice" which is not that of the author and only problematically that of one of the characters. The voice that speaks in fiction seems somehow to bring us language from an indefinite point. When Maurice Blanchot says that the narrative voice is impersonal, he means that the third person is not really a person, as are "I" and "you." As Benveniste pointed out, the third person is defined as not being the other two.[12] "He" or "she" or "they" are not present in discourse. They occur outside it. The narrative voice of fiction is behind the scenes, somewhere else. The origin of speech has shifted to a place whose locus is uncertain. The "he" rather than the "I" narrates. There is no notion of fiction among the Azande to my knowledge. But there is a shift of narrative center. The Zande man consults his oracle. Someone else, present only through signs, speaks. The estrangement of the voice that makes it recognizably not the speaker's own voice takes place. The man's own voice would not be acceptable. He knows who hates him, but this is not enough to establish that any particular one of them is a witch. Just where his own voice would not be acceptable, a foreign and therefore acceptable voice takes shape in the consultation of the oracle.

The Azande have well-defined procedures for identifying witches. The most important is their oracle. When a man feels he might be bewitched, he takes a bundle of chickens and a special poison (*benge*, from the vine of that name) into the bush. He feeds the poison to the chickens, asking it questions to which the fowl replies by dying or by surviving. With the care and patience that marked his work, Evans-Pritchard gave his readers examples of the working of the oracle. For instance:

> Is Namarusu's health all right? (Does good fortune await her in the near future?) The fowl DIES, giving the answer "No" (her condition is bad).

> Is Kisanga's illness due to any one living on the opposite side of the new part of the government settlement? The fowl SURVIVES giving the answer "No."
>
> Will either of Kamanga's wives die in the near future? The fowl SURVIVES giving the answer "No."
>
> Is Namarusu's health threatened by any of those living near her? The fowl SURVIVES giving the answer "Yes."
>
> Will Kamanga one day beget a child? The fowl DIES, giving the answer "Yes."
>
> Will Kisanga be all right in the future? Is the bad magic which caused his sickness finished? The fowl SURVIVES, giving the answer "Yes." (303–4)

There are no special formulas for asking the questions. Though there are stereotyped phrases that recur, these are not ritualized. The oracle does not work because of what the man says or repeats. The questioner merely administers a certain poison, one that comes from far away and has gone through a ritual process, and this enables an answer to appear through the survival or death of the animal. The chicken, of course, cannot speak itself. It yields an answer nonetheless. We might also apply to the oracle; or at least Evans-Pritchard did, but probably without the eagerness and pleasure of the Zande who asked these questions.[13] The opposition Life/Death conveys a message to the Zande but not to others. The answer comes from knowledge of a special code which, even if we could speak the language of the Azande, we would be unlikely to credit. And this might be the case even if we posed the questions ourselves.

The difference, once again, arises at the point where neither the questioner nor anyone else knows the answer, where the reaction we would impose on ourselves would be either silence or speculation. Neither is the case here. The bird, dead or alive, speaks, or, rather, conveys a voice from elsewhere. This answer is not simply given by the code, or even by the code believed in. Rather, what belief consists in here is allowing a conjunction to be made between question and answer which evades recourse to experience. "If Adiyambio, who is suffering from a deep-seated ulcer, remains in our government settlement, will he die?" (302). The possibility of linking the survival of Adiyambio with staying in the settlement for us would have to involve intervening factors. The presence of medical care, the existence of water to wash his wound, etc. Here, however, two states are linked only because the oracle allows the possibility of such linkage.

The oracle here furnishes the magic word, the copula that allows

anything to be linked to anything else. It not merely allows it, it stimulates such connections. It allows it to be authoritatively said that "X is a witch." The operations of magic in that sense are the opposite of those of hysteria. The hysterical symptom is a compromise formation. The compromise is between the censoring agency, which does not want a wishful impulse to emerge into consciousness, and that wish. As a result, an odd and indecipherable sign comes into existence which contains that impulse without allowing it to reach its full expression. The oracle, however, as the source of knowledge of unthinkable possibilities, stimulates the expression of impulse. It finds an object for a feeling of hatred that before that was unclear. It is this, I believe, that accounts in part for the pleasure in consulting the oracle.

The impulse issues in the speech of the oracle. It is, of course, the voice of the interlocutor estranged from himself. The bird speaks only when the interlocutor "performs" it. It responds to the interlocutor's question, but, unlike addressing a person who has the freedom not merely to say various things in response but not to respond at all, the bird must "speak" when the interlocutor feeds it poison and must say only "Yes" or "No," and only that.

The "speech" of the person who consults the oracle as it passes through the bird is analogous to traumatized speech. Analogous because the person hears his own voice without being able to feel himself to be the origin of its words (or signs). But it differs because instead of feeling that his words are inadequate, as does the traumatized person, the interlocutor feels them to be significant. What makes the difference is the appearance of a narrative voice that cannot be equated with that of the author but that seems to issue from the text. It is the transformation of "I" into "he" of which Maurice Blanchot speaks.[14]

This is not mere slight of hand, any more than it is when, in a culture where the genre "fiction" exists, a writer transforms his voice into one that seems to emerge from the paper on which he deposes his words. Azande themselves noted the similarity when they compared the poison oracle to paper as used by Europeans:

> Azande often say: "the poison oracle does not err, it is our paper. What your paper is to you the poison oracle is to us," for they see in the art of writing the source of a European's knowledge, accuracy, memory of events, and predictions of the future. (263)

The Zande comparison with paper invokes memory and predictions, among other things. The comparison with writing comes when, achieving an impersonal voice which speaks from the page, the person writing is relieved of the strictures he puts on himself when he speaks as "I." There is also authority ("knowledge, accuracy") which comes when an impersonal voice speaks, as with writing and with the oracle. It is in the change of person of the speaker that the Zande oracle becomes influential as well as pleasurable.

The oracle is a form of writing, but the difference in genre is important. When we see a written page, we automatically ask ourselves what sort of thing is written on it. Is it a shopping list, a story, a journalistic account, and so on. Without knowing that, we do not know how to read it. But the Zande oracle gives only one form of language. The quotation above is preceded by these words of Evans-Pritchard:

> For how can a Zande do without his poison oracle? His life would be of little worth. Witches would make his wife and children sick and would destroy his crops and render his hunting useless. Every endeavour would be frustrated, every labour and pain would be to no purpose. At any moment a witch might kill him and he could do nothing to protect himself and his family. Men would violate his wife and steal his goods, and how would he be able to identify and avenge himself on adulterer and thief? Without the aid of his poison oracle he knows that he is helpless and at the mercy of every evil person. It is his guide and his counsellor. (262–63)

The only thing comparable in authority in Zande thinking to their oracle is paper for Europeans. Paper understood by people who, in 1926, when Evans-Pritchard was in Zandeland, could not read or write but who remarked the place of literacy in the lives of Europeans. The (to them) indecipherable signs of writing answered all questions, including important matters about themselves. The only difference between poisoned chickens and letters on paper in their understanding is that only the first are legible to them.

This is, of course, a form of literacy. It is magical, however, because its signs, and there are only two, authorize or forbid connections. "If Adiyambio, who is suffering from a deep-seated ulcer, remains in our government settlement, will he die? The fowl SURVIVES, giving the answer 'No'" (302). The chicken's death, meaning "Yes," would say that the con-

nection between Adiyambio's survival and remaining in the government settlement is authorized, as we put it. It is a magic sign, as we have understood magic from Mauss: it allows connections where otherwise none could be made. The oracle furnishes the magical copula.

But when everything that comes to mind is acceptable, some of it produces fright nonetheless. The oracle does not forbid such thoughts. When it says "No," it means, in the example given, that the witch has not been identified. But there is a witch. Another name is placed before the oracle. This time it dies, and so says "Yes." The witch has appeared. The witch kills; the threat of death has materialized. The possibly worst thought that one might have, "I am dying," is valorized. A small sign, stomach trouble perhaps, means that, indeed, someone is trying to kill me. The oracle justifies my fear. Denial of fear is not one of its modes any more than is repression. In place of both there is the exteriorization of anxieties. They no longer belong to me, to my psyche. Instead, they have been given a place in a story about the world. I might have barely escaped death when the granary collapsed; my near relative was perhaps killed. The witch is still at work; my stomach pain indicates that that is the case. But I did not know it to be. I only suspected the worst. Now I know it.

I know it through my own words estranged from myself; which is to say from my own expression of my fear. It is not merely the recourse available once one can identify the witch that lightens this heavy load of anxiety. It is also the appearance of authority I can trust even when that authority announces a menace to me. If the verification of suspicion ameliorates life, it is because it returns one to the social. Which is to say that it unifies me. When I merely suspected, I was speaking to myself, giving myself various opinions (A is the witch; no, B is) and, by definition, since it is suspicion that is involved, finding my words unreliable. I do not know how to act toward A and B, or, for that matter, others, any of whom could well be the witch. When my words return to me through the oracle, I am unified again. I present a single face to everyone. I am now in a state to approach the witch. Precisely what "witch" means in its most virulent form, that he is anything or anybody, preventing any consolidation of myself in front of him, has been avoided.

Magic, seen in this perspective, was an intermediary between impulse and authority, converting the first into the second. It did so, however, only at a cost. The singularity of accident, its inexplicability, was reduced to the generality of "the witch." Accident itself is obscured. The witch, one is tempted to say, is "revealed" by the oracle. But it is more accurate to say that "witch" is a word which conceals accident. The naming of the witch, whether through the oracle or simply through assertion, as is the case in most places in the world, is therefore unstable and comes only through an unverifiable procedure.

The wishfulness that sustains this procedure nonetheless can be seen in conjunction with another form of Zande magic, namely, special plants which are thought to have magical potency. These grow in caverns hollowed out along streams. They are difficult to reach. Evans-Pritchard describes these places:

> These streams arise in springs which have eaten out of the earth dark chasms, shaded by tall trees and obscured with dense brushwood. Sometimes the erosion has burrowed short tunnels into the earth, which lead off from the main cavern, buttressed with roots of gigantic trees and roofed with thick foliage of shrub and creeper. Azande fear these caverns, which house snakes and are the homes of ghosts and of the Supreme Being. (215)

In these dark places, where one is frightened and imagines ghostly figures, in fact one welcomes them also because they show the way. "The ghosts merely show them where plants are growing in the darkness" (216). Ghosts, instead of leading one astray, show one where to go. So that exactly where one might think that imagination misleads, ghosts of the dead lead one straight. To restate this, ghosts, instead of being terrifying figures, validate one's meanderings, or at least they did so in this instance. Azande, wandering in dark caves, cannot be led astray by illusions produced by an evil genius. Whatever comes to mind is not merely acceptable, it is for the best. Here, magic does not lead one to insupportable associations and eventually to unrestrained and unrestrainable anxiety. In place of a superego which prevents the emergence of old wishes, incompatible thoughts, and impulses, the past in the form of ghosts and ancestors protect and allow one to go where, under other circumstances, one would be said to go astray.

We ask ourselves if deadly violence against "others" is a structural feature of society. The Azande, to this point, do not support this supposition. Their obsession with witches might have done so had not witchcraft

also supported sociality. At the same time, when one looks at Zande social life, as we shall in a moment, we will see that witchcraft was a major cause of social fragmentation. Witches, at the time of Evans-Pritchard's study, were seldom killed. At the same time, without the imposition of colonial authority, witches were likely to have been. Before colonization, witches were often put to death.

What is at stake is whether through witchcraft accusations a voice of the community can be formed, as Lévi-Strauss says was the case for the Zuni, and which would be the case if the workings of the oracle and the subsequent process of accusation and acknowledgment worked perfectly and worked without the support of externally applied force. Is the voice of the community in a witch hunt the basis for sociality? Is the formation of an enemy the foundation of a society?

IV. The Ambiguous Return to the Social

Witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard said, was normal in Zande society. "Witchcraft is . . . a common place happening and [a Zande man] seldom passes a day without mentioning it" (64). An accident happens, a misfortune of some sort. Azande understand the natural causes of the event. But they ask, "Why did it happen to me?" and "Why did it happen just then?" At that point, they suspect sorcery or witchcraft. (Evans-Pritchard distinguished the two terms, but the majority of anthropologists did not follow his distinction. Hence, I use them interchangeably.) Evans-Pritchard observes:

> Those who speak in a roundabout manner and are not straightforward in their conversation are suspected of witchcraft. Azande are very sensitive and usually on the look-out for unpleasant allusions to themselves in apparently harmless conversation. This is a frequent occasion of quarrels, and there is no means of determining whether the speaker has meant the allusions or whether his hearer has supplied them. For example, a man sits with some of his neighbors and says, "No man remains for ever in the world." One of the old men sitting nearby gives a disapproving grunt at this remark, hearing which the speaker explains that he was talking of an old man who has just died; but others may think that he meant that he wished the death of one of those with whom he was sitting. (111)

There is an "apparently harmless conversation," but Azande are "very sensitive," and listening to it, some find in it "an unpleasant allusion to themselves." But no one can be sure whether the illusion was intended or not. Evans-Pritchard speaks of "apparently harmless" words. Evans-Pritchard himself would not have found the sentence, "No man remains for ever in the world" a threat. What in other places passes without remark, among the Azande leads to quarrels and to accusations of witchcraft. Once something bad happens, the sentence is recalled and interpreted as a menace. No matter that it was not meant that way.

Azande can prove that the sentence was intended as a threat. After a misfortune, they put the name of the speaker to their oracle and ask whether he was responsible. The oracle confirms (possibly) that the speaker caused the accident. It does not say it was merely an accident and that there was no witch. A witch is always found; if it is not the first name put to the oracle, it is the next, or the one after. And the founding of the witch, after the fact, recalls the ambiguous sentence. In this way, the oracle offers "proof" of witchcraft and resolves an ambiguity. But on the other hand, the existence of witchcraft offers the possibility that many sentences might, in retrospect, have had another sense. It is a cause of suspicion as well as its resolution.

In such a society most exchange becomes suspect. Evans-Pritchard experienced this himself when he tried to do favors for his friends:

> I found again and again that I had only to be generous to, even very friendly with, one of my neighbours and he would at once be apprehensive of witchcraft, and any ill-luck which befell him would be attributed to the jealousy my friendship had aroused in the breasts of his neighbours. The Zande believes that his fellows cannot bear that you be generous to him or publicly show him any favour, and he who lives in Zandeland must be prepared for malice that he has caused by ill considered benevolence. (111)

One gives and the result is suspicion. Not suspicion of the giver, in this case, but of those who were not party to the gift. One might think of Evans-Pritchard's gift as a sort of accident. A strange white man appears where one is rarely seen. He lives with "us," which must have been unprecedented, and he gives us things. There is unlikely to have been a way to anticipate this event. He is benevolent, and "I" profit from him. But I know at the same time that the result is that I will be the target of witchcraft.

A man's crop is successful, his nets are full of game, his termites swarm, and he is convinced that he has become the butt of his neighbors' jealousy and will be bewitched. His crops fail, his nets are empty, his termites do not swarm, and by these signs he knows that he has been bewitched by a jealous neighbor. How the misfortunes of others please a Zande. Nothing is more pleasing, more assuring, to him, more flattering to his self esteem, than the down fall of another. (102)

One does what one should, one becomes prosperous, and for that reason, one will be bewitched. One suffers, and one is convinced one has already been bewitched. If one's own good efforts attract witchcraft, it means that one cannot find a reflection of oneself, not merely as one knows oneself to be but as one should be, in one's fellows. One is always reflected wrongly. Or it might be that something of oneself unknown to oneself but known to others becomes public. One suffers and one knows that one does not deserve it; one has done as one should. Something is at work and it is the result in the first place of the way one is seen by one's neighbor. Whether he sees correctly is the issue. Since, as will become apparent, no one can be sure he is not a witch, the neighbor may be correct. For that reason, when one sees others fall, one feels gratified and reassured; it is him and not me. What one suspects about oneself and sometimes finds confirmed is true of others.

Exactly the force that is condemned when "I" am the victim is celebrated when someone else is affected by it. At this point, we see how occult, anti-social power is cultivated, apparently by the whole of adult Zande society, or at least by men. It is the way in which something inappropriable, a power which remains always outside the possibility of being made an approved part of Zande society, which never becomes the basis of authority or social position, is nonetheless celebrated. When "self-esteem" is enhanced because the power of sorcery has caused the other's downfall, one sides with this destructive power to one's own psychic advantage. This advantage apparently is never publicly celebrated. One never reads that someone "deserved" what he got, which would make sorcery an auxiliary to social values. It remains contrary to ethics and approved values. But as power it attracts. This attractive power, always disowned, is at the base of the jealousy Evans-Pritchard describes, as it allows Azande to celebrate the misfortune of others. Each wants to be on the side of this power, and yet, socially speaking, this is an impossibility.

The existence of such a power in the heart of Zande society would be unsupportable if there were not some way of dealing with it. The Zande way was not to exclude the witch, nor even to deprive him of his witchcraft. It was to unveil him, at which moment the witch, unaware of his witchcraft, apologized. The acknowledgment of witchcraft was enough, in the circumstances that pertained during the time of Evans-Pritchard's study, to allow an accommodation to a power that could only harm. This form of accommodation, it seems to me, could never have worked if there were not the restraint put on vengeance by colonial authority.

A man who believes himself or his relatives to be bewitched consults his oracles. They confirm the identity of the witch. He now behaves cautiously. "We must remember that they must avoid an open quarrel with the witch, since this will only aggravate him and perhaps cause him to kill his victim outright, and will in any case involve the aggressors in serious social, and possibly legal, difficulties" (92). He is likely to make a public oration. He declares that he knows the name of the witch but that he will not disclose it to spare the witch shame. Evans-Pritchard cites the case of a man whose kinsman fell ill. All death is caused by witchcraft. The man warns the witch that if his kinsman dies, there will be vengeance. He climbs a tree and gives a public oration, for which there is a term in Azande, *de kuba*. From a high branch he shouts:

Hi! Hi! Hi! It not an animal O! It is not an animal O! I went today to consult the rubbing board oracle, and it said to me that those men who are killing my kinsmen are not far off, that they are right here near by, and that it is those neighbours of mine who are killing my kinsman. It is thus I honour you [meaning the witch] by telling you that I will not speak his name[the name of the witch]. I will not choose him out by himself. If he has ears he will hear what I am saying. Were my kinsman to die I would make magic and then someone would die and my name would be tarnished because I have kept silence. This is why I am telling you that, if my kinsman continues to be sick unto death, I will surely reveal that man so that every one will know him. . . . That man that has ears, one speaks but a few words and he can hear them. After what I have spoken to you I will not burden my mouth again, but I will choose out the man himself and expose him before his face. All of you hear well my words. It is finished." (93)

A certain public, those within range of his voice as he shouts from the tree top, hear him. Climbing the tree, he is no longer *en face* of those whom he

knows. His shift of perspective changes also the identity of his intended audience. They include his neighbors, but they are now also anyone who hears in the possible capacity of "witch" but from whom no immediate response is called for. He relays news of what has happened to him; the oracle has spoken to him and revealed a secret. He does not transmit what the oracle says, but he says that he is capable of doing so. He declares that he knows a secret, but he does not reveal the identity of the witch. It could be anyone within hearing. Anyone might be the witch at that point. There is thus another audience than the one he addresses on the ground, where whomever he speaks with answers as neighbor or in another sociologically defined capacity. Here, he speaks to everyone as though any one of them was a witch. But he wants the secret to be kept so that he can once again address these people in the way he did before. He does not expect a verbal reply; only an improvement in the health of his kinsman.

If his kinsmen does not get well, he reveals the witch, but he is unlikely to do so directly. He asks a deputy of the king to send a wing of the poisoned chicken oracle to the presumed witch. The deputy does so himself or asks someone else to do so. Again, a public element is invoked. Witchcraft is not a private matter, it is clear. It involves notions of a public, at least of a certain kind, and of the Zande state.

> On his arrival the messenger lays the wing on the ground in front of the witch. . . . He treats the witch with respect, for such is the custom, and anyhow it is none of his business. Almost invariably the witch replies courteously that he is unconscious of injuring anyone, that if it is true that he has injured the man in question he is very sorry, and that if it is he alone who is troubling him then he will surely recover, because from the bottom of his heart he wishes him health and happiness. (95)

A man accused of witchcraft, says Evans-Pritchard, is "astonished." "He has not conceived of witchcraft from this angle. To him it has always been a reaction against others in his own misfortunes, so that it is difficult for him to apprehend the notion when he himself is its objective in the misfortunes of other people" (118). One might think that he would repudiate the charge, Evans-Pritchard says, "since witchcraft is imaginary and a man cannot possibly be a witch" (119). But this is not the case. "A man cannot help being a witch; it is not his fault that he is born with witchcraft in his belly. He may be quite ignorant that he is a witch and quite innocent of acts of witchcraft. In this state he might do someone an injury unwittingly, but when he is exposed by the poison oracle he is then conscious of his powers and begins to use them with malice" (121–22). It is rare, however, for a man to refuse the accusation. "A man who behaves in this manner is acting contrary to custom and is insulting the chief's deputy who ordered the wing to be laid before him. He will be laughed at as a provincial who is ignorant of the manners of polite society, and may gain the reputation of a hardened witch who admits his witchcraft by the anger he displays when he is found out. What he ought to do is to blow out water and say: 'If I possess witchcraft in my belly I am unaware of it; may it cool. It is thus that I blow out water'" (122–23). The best defense against an accusation of witchcraft is to admit to it. Not to do so will convince people one is a witch. To do so will confirm the accusation, of course, but it will also show that the man behaves according to the rules of polite society. The acknowledgment is itself the sign that the social and not the anti-social reigns.

Evans-Pritchard tells us that the accused might well feel offended. If so, however, he conceals his feelings. He blows out water as a sign both of acknowledgment of witchcraft and of lack of hostile feelings. A man told Evans-Pritchard it "was not only polite to do so when requested but also showed an absence of ill feeling which ought to characterize all good citizens" (124).[15] Accusations, one should add, are so common that "a man will be very lucky if he escapes occasional accusation, and after the poison oracle has declared on several occasions that a man has bewitched others he may doubt his immunity" (125).

Witchcraft is inherited by men through their fathers and women through their mothers. It is a substance attached to an indefinite organ, but likely to be the intestine or another organ concerned with digestion. A person may not know that he is a witch. He may activate his witchcraft simply by his ill-feelings for another. Even when it is established by autopsy that witchcraft substance is in the father, the son may not be considered a witch until the oracle reveals him to be so. This, according to Evans-Pritchard, is because witchcraft is thought about practically and not theoretically. Theoretically, a Zande could know that so-and-so is a witch; but practically, he is not interested until misfortune leads him to search for its agent. Even then, it is the oracle and not previous knowledge that de-

termines who is responsible for a particular misfortune.

From the point of view of the accused, witchcraft is treated here as a lapsus, a bêtise, as the last quotation illustrates. One does something, it is by error, one did not know it, and one makes one's excuses. Partly this is mere convention, but it is also believed in. Because witchcraft is beyond the control of the witch, someone accused has no trouble admitting his witchcraft; before the accusation it was unknown to him. The admission is enough to end the matter. The witch says "he is not causing the sick man injury with intent. He says that he addresses the witchcraft in his belly, beseeching it to be cool (inactive) and that he makes this appeal from his heart and not merely with his lips" (96).

Everything is done to make admission of witchcraft easy. The accused blows on the chicken wing as a sign that one has only good wishes toward the bewitched—a tacit or perhaps ambiguous admission of witchcraft. Evans-Pritchard calls it an enactment of guilt: "The fact that a man has publicly to enact a confession of guilt by blowing on the fowl's wing [and this enactment becomes believed] must render him at least doubtful about the existence of witchcraft in his belly" (125). If it can be admitted to, it is not simply because the nature of witches means anyone might be a witch, but also because, according to Evans-Pritchard, witches are not uncanny. By which he means that witchcraft is a daily occurence, at least in speech, and in that sense normal rather than strange. But, of course, if witchcraft were normal, not only in the statistical sense but in the sense of conforming to a standard by which it could be known, it would not require the extraordinary measures Azande take to confirm their suspicions. Moreover, Azande witchcraft involves a mood, a state of mind or feeling, as attested to by the suspicion that surrounds it and that therefore merits the term "uncanny." It is precisely to alleviate this mood that there is accusation and acknowledgment. Such relief can only be temporary, at least so far as the accused is concerned. His public admission is also an admission to himself, if not of guilt, then of the frequently realized possibility of being a witch.

Social recognition of witchcraft, as exemplified in the accusation and the assertion that the accused bears no ill-will toward his accuser, is ambiguous. On the one hand, the accusation is made because harm, even lethal damage, is being done. On the other hand, the acceptance of the admission as the end of the matter seems to turn witchcraft into something acceptable and even benign. The juncture between the good neighbor and the bad witch is obscured by the ease with which one is transformed into the other and back again, and by the acceptance of this fact. The witch is tolerated, not in his capacity as witch but because "witch" can quickly become "neighbor." And, of course, "neighbor" easily changes into "witch." The solution to the problem of witchcraft is thus also the making of further difficulties.

Contrary to our association of witches and violence, there was, in Zande Land of the 1920s, little violence associated with witchcraft. I believe this was for legal reasons. "If you suffer some misfortune you may not retaliate by assaulting the witch who has caused it, for, with the possible exception of loss of an entire elusine crop, the only act of witchcraft that is legally recognized by punishment meted out to a witch is the crime of murder. This must be proved by a verdict of a prince's poison oracle and he alone can authorize vengeance or indemnity" (86–87). Moreover, witchcraft accusations do not lead to vengeance, except at death. A man whose relative has died consults the oracle to find the witch who killed him. A public announcement is made that the witch has been found. But the name is not revealed and nothing more happens. If, later, the man not publicly named or one of his relatives suffers, it might be said that this was vengeance. But vengeance remains imaginary. However, once again, one must keep in mind that colonial authority forbade witch killings, which earlier had taken place.

To believe that one has taken vengeance without making any public act means that one targets not the social person but the witch, and that the two do not coincide for long. The witch and the social person are easily pried apart and pasted together again. Accusations of witchcraft are based on the oracle, which "never errs." The names placed before it are, however, those whom the Zande believes hate him. Hatred is certainly an emotion that belongs to the social. Witchcraft is tied to social identity, but not for long and not consequentially.

> It is . . . to the interest of both parties that they should not become estranged through the incident. They have to live together as neighbours afterwards and to cooperate in the life of the community. It is also to their mutual advantage to

avoid all appearance of anger or resentment for a more direct and immediate reason. The whole point of the procedure is to put the witch in a good temper by being polite to him. The witch on his part ought to feel grateful to the people who have warned him so politely of the danger in which he stands. We must remember that since witchcraft has no real existence a man does not know that he has bewitched another, even if he is aware that he bears him ill will. But, at the same time, he believes firmly in the existence of witchcraft and in the accuracy of the poison oracle, so that when the oracle says that he is killing a man by witchcraft he is probably thankful for having been warned in time, for if he had been allowed to murder the man, all the while ignorant of his action, he would inevitably have fallen a victim to vengeance. By the polite indication of an oracular verdict from the relatives of a sick man to the witch who has made him sick both the life of the sick man and the life of the witch are saved. (97)

I may feel that my neighbor hates me and that he is a witch. It does not mean that we should not try to get along. Hatred and suspicion permeated Zande society. But they were accommodated to. One can even argue that witchcraft made hatred acceptable. Rather than long-held, pent-up emotions whose only outlet was violence, one blamed the witch and excused the neighbor. But if witchcraft and hatred were integrated into Zande society, it was true as well that belief in witchcraft fostered hatred because it fostered suspicion, as we have already seen.

"We must remember that since witchcraft has no real existence a man does not know that he has bewitched another, even if he is aware that he bears him ill will." No one can know for sure that he is innocent, the power of witchcraft having the capacity to act without the knowledge of its agents. The public admission of witchcraft is not merely for the sake of social harmony. It is also the admission of the accused of the possibility that he has witchcraft substance in him. On the one hand, the admission of guilt allows the return of the social personality of the accused. On the other, it is the admission to himself that he is a witch. If Azande witchcraft appears abstract, in view of the ease with which it is detached from the social personality, a person's realization of his own witchcraft, meaning the presence of death within him, must have given it added reality.

This makes it all the more striking that there can have been no dialectical movement of Zande society in so far as it centered on witchcraft. Just at the point where recognition of witchcraft might be thought to mean a change in the status and the identity of the accused, the opposite is the case. There was rather a restoration to a normality that, for its part, had been disrupted only in the mind of the accuser. Each time politics and identity seemed to coincide, they broke apart. And each time they broke apart, they came together again, but in a way that never changed social arrangements. Or, to put it in other terms, each reflection of myself by an other was admitted to without being reflected in established social relations.

Everyone was affected. Evans-Pritchard said that no Zande he met would admit to being a witch. But he added that the answer was not always believable:

> I sometimes asked a man, if I knew him very well, "Are your a witch?" I expected a prompt unqualified denial couched in offended tone, but received often a humble reply, "Ai, master, if there is witchcraft in my belly I know nothing of it. I am no witch because people have not seen witchcraft in the bellies of our kin." However, it was less the replies I received than the tone and manner in which they were given that gave me an impression of doubt. Had I asked them whether they were thieves the tone and manner of their reply would have been decided and angry. (125–26)

> But though many men declare in private that they are not witches and that there must have been a mistake, my experience of Azande when presented with hens' wings has convinced me that some think, for a short time at any rate, that perhaps after all they are witches. (124)

In the Zande view, everyone, including in a vague but nonetheless real way the speaker himself, was potentially a witch. Zande society thus reflected the situation Jacques Derrida described when he spoke of "tout autre est tout autre," which means both that every other is an other and that every other is wholly other.[6] In Zande society, I accept my reflection of myself in the eyes of my accuser. I, too, am other than I knew myself to be. I am a stranger to myself. And everyone else whom I know is also, at least potentially, entirely different from their social appearance. Zande identities slipped between the social and asocial, between the known and the revealed, though in the largest sense, witchcraft itself was never revealed. It is this constant sliding that makes Zande witchcraft irreducible to whatever social conflict might have preceded it. In that case, witchcraft would be another name for "rival," while a successful accusation would resolve a conflict of interest.

In place of conflict, the admission of witchcraft led to a disinvolvement. Just at the point where the other is recognized as totally other and totally inimical, there is a restoration of identity.

> [Witchcraft] is a planned assault by one man on another whom he hates. A witch acts with malice aforethought. Azande say that hatred, jealousy, envy, backbiting, slander, and so forth go ahead and witchcraft follows after. A man must first hate his enemy and will then bewitch him. . . . Witchcraft tends to become synonymous with the sentiments which are supposed to cause it, so that Azande think of hatred and envy and greed in terms of witchcraft and likewise think of witchcraft in terms of the sentiments it discloses. (107)

One seems to have here a complete socialization of witchcraft. Hatred comes first, witchcraft follows. One therefore expects war, but there is peace. Zande society seemed to consist of terrible accusations and peaceful reconciliations, or, one can say, of constant change between the socially defined and the appearance of the asocial and anti-social. Zande witchcraft is hatred, but hatred does not result in conflict but reconciliation.

The assumption which makes this possible is that witchcraft is self-enclosure. The person closed upon himself, unaware of what he is or does, is a witch. Hatred might be embedded in conflicts of interest, but these have no chance to play themselves out in the idiom of Zande witchcraft. If the witch could be indissolubly wedded to his social person, things would be different. As it is,

> in their representation of witchcraft hatred is one thing and witchcraft another thing. All men are liable to develop sentiments against their neighbors, but unless they are actually born with witchcraft in their bellies they cannot do their enemies an injury by merely disliking them. (108)

In this passage, witchcraft might still be trigged by hatred. But as Evans-Pritchard described it, it operates with a certain autonomy, in part because witchcraft is linked to accident independently of hatred.

> Notions of witchcraft are evoked primarily by misfortune and are not entirely dependent on enmities. Thus a man who suffers a misfortune knows that he has been bewitched, and only then does he seek in his mind to find out who wishes him ill and might have bewitched him. If he cannot recall any incidents that might have caused a man to hate him, and if he has no particular enemies, he must still consult the oracles to discover a witch. Hence, even a prince will sometimes accuse commoners of witchcraft, for his misfortunes must be accounted for and checked, even though those whom he accuses of witchcraft are not his enemies. (105)

Witchcraft, hidden even from oneself if one is a witch, reveals itself through accident or through lapsus. Evans-Pritchard speaks of "belief" in witchcraft. Which is to say that Azande know that someone can do harm without necessarily knowing what they are doing. It is a Freudian error. An "error" because it is contrary to the social; "Freudian" because it is done without the consciousness of the actor. The situation is ambiguous and some may think that the witch acted knowingly. But the act is treated socially as though the person acted without awareness, as though it precedes from accident. In this way, Azande acknowledge something similar to our idea of the unconscious. Their acknowledgment is in the interest not of suppressing or eradicating what emerges from there, but of neutralizing it. Consider this description of Azande behavior:

> Europeans do not always understand why Azande are so restless; why each man likes to live far from his nearest neighbors; why a man sometimes leaves one homestead and builds another one; why he chooses to live in one place rather than in another place which to our eyes looks better suited for a home; and why he sometimes leaves his homestead for weeks and lives uncomfortably beneath a grass shelter in the bush. But Azande go away to live in the bush because they are sick and the poison oracle has told them that if they hide in a certain place the witch who is devouring them will not be able to find them and so they will recover. (263)

Evans-Pritchard describes something more than the usual bewilderment attendant on unfamiliarity with a culture. Usually, one comes to a strange place and what one learns about it helps one to find a place there. This was not the case in Zande Land. Even after one knows that Azande live for periods in the bush because they believe they are attacked by witches, it does little to help one understand the person whom one is looking for who, it turns out, is somewhere in the wilderness. His reasons for being there remain inaccessible.

The same is true on a larger scale. One cannot say, for instance, that Azande do not live in clusters but apart from each other for reasons that have to do with the structure of their lineages or for ecological reasons. One has to look at individual motivations. The oracle has told someone he will be bewitched if he builds next to someone else. The person there-

fore decides to build his homestead away from others. The distribution of the population depends not on traditions or on environmental exigencies but on impulse. The Azande thus give the appearance of being directed by something incomprehensible. Impulse is acted upon, made part of "normal" life, even instituting its own patterns on Zande life.

This "pattern-despite-itself," as it were, is the result of the strange relation between witchcraft and accident. Accident, the singular, as it is seen as Zande become involved in misfortune, is submitted to the oracle to know who the bewitcher is. The singular event, classed with all other singular events as the effect of witchcraft, then acted upon, yields a pattern which is at once social because most Azande seem to have led their lives according to their oracles, and yet is also asocial since it is the result of a mere agglomeration of singular accidents and their effects.

A society marked in so many places by the valorization, or at least the interest and perhaps the obsession with the accidental, raises many questions. Accident in the first place is made acceptable by being neutralized. The revelation of the witch means also the evaporation of his menace. In place of the superego which censors impulse, the Azande seem to have had an agency to welcome or at least tolerate it. But the permeation of Zande society by accident is also the generation of suspicion and the setting of Azande against each other.

V. The Oracle Again

The oracle says only "Yes" or "No." It thus simplifies suspicion. One might have suspected X of envy, for instance, after mentally reconstructing incidents which pointed to that. The oracle, however, does not speak of intentions or of suspicions. Its voice is similar to the voice of a person in trance. It is a voice divorced from subjectivity. The obscurity of its provenance alone guarantees its lack of interestedness.

The Zande oracle does not say what cannot be said but only suspected, à la the Zuni witch as seen by Lévi-Strauss. Rather, it says what can be said and is said ordinarily, but when said ordinarily is without certainty. It is fiction that gives this certainty, if we can use "fiction" as a universal category. This is not, of course, because it is seen as contrary to fact. Rather, it draws on what fiction draws upon. It commences from a condition for linguistic expression that precedes subject matter. This is not the innate capacity of certain social types who, according to Lévi-Strauss, have more words than referents and become socially useful for that reason.[17] It is, rather, in the estrangement of someone from his own concerns that he discovers (another) voice.

The oracle speaks from afar. The magical poison fed to the fowl to make it talk has to be sought on a journey that takes six or seven days and passes through lands foreign to the Azande.[18] And it must be treated ritually before it is effective. Only in this way does the chicken's survival or lack thereof matter. An interlocutor is constructed as the speech of the person who interrogates it is separated from himself, just as Blanchot said about writing. What returns to the interrogator is not his intentions. These are confused; he only suspects. Rather, the "it" that speaks is purged of intentions, hence of suspicions, as this "it" speaks through a code similar to mathematics. (The code consists of only binary oppositions. For that reason, one does not need to know the Azande language to understand the Azande oracle, though, of course, one needs to know the language of the man who asks the question.) An answer is given, in a voice no longer that of the interrogator, which is precise and purified of doubt, just as it is purified of language, speaking now only in a single binary opposition which, like numbers, have the same graphic sign despite the particularity of the language spoken.

This purification of voice of language and doubt at the same time is accomplished through distance. The distance from which the *benge* poison comes and its ritual separation from ordinary substances indicate the length which the voice of the operator of the oracle travels. One might think that addressing the oracle is comparable to speaking to a stranger from a distant part of the earth. One does not know his language. Nonetheless, for some reason, one is confident that, if he raises his left hand and not his right when one finishes speaking, it means "Yes." How he arrives at his answer is of no concern whatsoever. One only knows that one cannot know. And one is in no way concerned that the person is wholly unacquainted with the circumstances one recounts to him. But one believes, nonetheless, that he always answers accurately. It might be better to say, here, that "accuracy" is defined by the supposition of an answer rather than by its content.

"Distance," in this case, means distance from present circumstances. The oracle in that sense is truly a third person, one not present in discourse. The oracle, when it speaks, never says "I," never indicates itself as the bearer of language. If it is somehow there nonetheless, its absence from discourse is taken as the presence of a code particular to itself, even if not belonging to a particular language. It poses simply as a rudimentary form of language itself.

If the oracle is stripped of subjectivity, the person whom it answers becomes the same for the moment that a discourse pertains between the two. The oracle returns questions with suspicions, miscellaneous thoughts or waverings all gone, replaced by one of two indicators. The interrogator of the oracle is no more responded to as a person than is the driver of a car at a stop-and-go light. Who he is socially, even his name, does not matter. He is not reflected back to himself as a social persona, nor even as a subject of the law, as is the person who stops for a red light. He is subject to accident, either in the past or the future, but this cannot render him a "subject," one capable of holding contraries together, in Hegel's definition. When the oracle confirms some of his suspicions and puts others at rest, and allows him, armed with the certainty furnished by the oracle, to speak, he is again a normal subject of Azande society.

Before consulting the oracle, speaking to someone else, suspecting witchcraft, the speaker might hesitate to make an accusation for fear that it would not be accepted or would be subject to doubts and modifications. He might be afraid that his words would not be well received and find, as a result, that he is tongue-tied or at least unpersuasive. Facing the oracle, however, he is not before a censor; quite the opposite. The oracle will give him words which are not subject to the difficulties of assessing the justice of his accusation. The truth (as opposed to justice) of his claim to being bewitched does not rest on facts; it rests on avoiding them. It depends on the avoidance of reference to the world in favor of an application to a source of language. That is why the oracle can be compared to fiction or to a source of speech.

The conditions of Azande life make authoritative language difficult to come by. One is almost constantly obsessed by suspicion. One therefore cannot find one's own voice, to use the common phrase. The oracle is the wish for the recuperation of voice, realized through the commonality of

conditions that pertained in Azande Land. It is a collective illusion, which is not to condemn it, since every culture probably needs and has such an institution. To speak of "illusion," here, is to say that the oracle carries its own justification with it. It is its own law, generated in the moments of its address, rather than being subject to the sources of authority rooted, for instance, in genealogy or rank.[9]

The man who receives the signs of the oracle may then shout from the treetops, warning the witch of possible retaliation if he does not cease his nefarious activities. Or he may confront the accused, at least indirectly, sending him a wing of the chicken. Whatever the case, "witch" is then a word that can be spoken authoritatively. This is the effect of the sacrifice of subjectivity and of reference to the world; it establishes a voice.

The accused person admits that he may be a witch. But that does not end the matter. He proves not that witches exist, that there is "really" a referent for the word, but that there is a source of language and that the accuser can speak and that the word produced can be put into circulation. Once set off, the word "witch" passes throughout Azande society, re-embedded in social concerns, triggered by revived suspicion and triggering suspicion in turn. Exchange is then found to be imbalanced. One gets something one has worked for, hence deserves, but one is the target of witchcraft. One knows it. Something else, the word "witch" has inserted itself into the evaluation of what one has received. In addition to the two parties who exchange, there is a third and this third is sinister.

The witch is established in Azande society in order to banish him, or at least to end his effects. But he is never definitely limited. When one is found and exorcised, there is soon another at large. Why? It is not necessarily because the witch is a fiction since this fiction is so strongly established in Azande society. Nor is it because there is much doubt about the way the fiction is created. It is rather that establishing the witch resulted in an imbalance in exchange. Whatever one got was thought not to match what one gave. Something unpredictable was likely to act from outside the terms of exchange. Accident, the embodiment of extraneous logic, in that sense was endemic to Azande society. "Witch" summed up these accidents and this unbalance. To establish the witch meant to disrupt social life. Thus, witchcraft is a "strange institution," in that it led one to expect the contrary of normality.

On the other hand, to expect disruption is to make a place for it. There is no equivalent institution among the Murngin to which those who suspect themselves of being ensorcelled can apply. There is nothing among them that establishes a single source of language through the estranging of the voice of the bewitched or through any other means. Without this stabilizing element, Murngin hear uncanny voices and have no identity through which to speak except that of "sorcerer." They cannot speak; the unspoken word ravages them; they die.

If Azande society was relatively peaceful, however, it is not, in my opinion, because Azande in a certain manner institutionalized witchcraft. "Success" here can only mean disruption. The ability to speak accusations of sorcery does not mean the acquiescence of sorcery as a force but rather the contrary. It means the installation of fear, the disequilibrium of exchange, and the circulation of accusations. We should not forget the putative beginnings of recourse to the oracle. It is accident, but it is, in particular, death. All death is the result of sorcery. "Witch," then, means "death." This word, produced by the oracle, detached from all circumstances, referring only to an incomprehensible event, produced fear. We are only a step away from the stammering of the bewitched Murngin.

The oracle authorizes speech. But the speech so authorized is not controlled by the speaker. Evans-Pritchard reports no consultation of the oracle about witches without ensuing accusations. The accusation of witchcraft starts in authority, but it continues through the *on dit*, the "they say." Precisely because an Azande charge of witchcraft is not the opinion of an individual it remains outside the control of the person. No one can revise it. And, being unable to do so, one can only repeat it. Precisely because the prejudices of the accuser have been put aside, along with all other aspects of his subjectivity, there is no possibility of integrating the accusation into the thoughts of the speaker. His only recourse is to diffuse the charge for himself by disseminating it. The truth of sorcery remains unacceptable.

Colonial law imposed peace. But there was also the politesse of Azande society which worked in favor of settlement and amicability. Without it, the acknowledgment of witchcraft would have been more difficult. The strength of the social thus aided the suppression of violence. Evans-Pritchard describes this without, however, indicating its source or the nature of its strength. In any case, politesse did nothing to limit suspicion or

the circulation of accusations. I have no evidence that Azande are among those Africans who complain that colonial society did not protect them from witchcraft. But they might well be since during an imposed peace fear circulated in their world. The oracle of course was a vehicle for the circulation of this fear. But it also has to be counted among the strengths of Azande sociality, establishing as it did an object in the world for the word "witch" and thus obscuring a deeper fear of something nameless and therefore less subject to control. Without the oracle, no doubt there still would have been suspicion and no doubt witchcraft as well, but without the integration we have seen into procedures of accusation and acceptance.

The authority of the oracle came not merely through the general acceptance of this institution, widespread in Africa. It derived primarily from the ability to establish a connection between a word, "witch," and an agreed on limit beyond which one knew nothing but which was believed to be the source of something that inflected that word. It consolidated a place where Azande could not themselves penetrate, where they agreed they could not penetrate further, and which was a source of truth. Through it a word was redefined with practically every important usage. It is the wedding of a word to a source of knowledge that enabled there to be a certain institution of witchcraft in their society.

We might think of the finding and bypassing of that limit in this way. The victim of accident wants to know "Why me?" He cannot answer the question. It would be better to say he becomes aware that he cannot answer this question. But he rehearses the accident to himself and goes on to formulate the causes ("witch"). It is this very attempt at formulation that generates the possibility of a response. By saying to himself what he suspects, he hears himself. He hears that he cannot know; that he can only suspect. It is not his confusion that is important at this point. It is that he finds a limit to his powers of thought and speech. He knows he cannot know or that he cannot speak with certainty. The movements of the ritualized chicken reflect his knowledge of this point back to himself. He is in face of something he cannot know, and yet the questions he poses press in a consolidated fashion. It is just at that moment that the motions of the poisoned chicken are taken as response.

The oracle thus converts suspicion into certainty. But, as an effect, witches multiply and suspicion is further stimulated. The certainty of the

oracle is spurious. It is agreed upon, but this agreement is on a name—"witch"—whose connection to the cause of accident can only be tenuous. The name, appearing at the limit of knowledge, in fact only names that limit. The agreement to accept the accusation as accurate means that it becomes part of discourse but this cannot, finally, solve the matter. Suspicion continues and a search for another name is set underway.

Accident fragments the subject, producing multiple voices. One might expect that the wish to unify the subject would produce trauma, as the person feels himself alienated from his experience, unable to put it into words convincingly. The Azande had another solution to accident. The victim of accident has been displaced from his ordinary social identity. "He" does not understand why the accident should have happened to "him." At the point where a debilitating dissociation between experience and speech would allow us to recognize trauma, he consults the oracle. Instead of trying to say what happened to him and not finding an adequate way to do so, the man who consults the oracle listens to it to find the witch. As with narrative as Blanchot describes it, a limit of language is established. One comes to the point where one can say nothing further; a point is reached beyond understanding. To try to speak further would make one inarticulate. But nonetheless one can hear something, as we have said. This limit makes itself felt through the *benge* poison. Killing a chicken with this poison seems to authorizes one to speak to it. But it would be more accurate to say that the person who consults the oracle now has an audience or an interlocutor for what up till then has been inexpressible, or at least unacceptable to others and to the person himself. The person says what is on his mind, what presses him to speak but about which he has no certainty himself and for which he can find no certain reception in ordinary circumstances.

In a normal situation, his speech might merely produce an echo of himself. This not merely because of the unfathomable nature of accident, but also because as a victim of accident, even at the second degree, he has been affected in ways that have nothing to do with his experience. Nothing that he is by virtue of his life in society or the status he has by birth explains why the accident happened to him. To ask about it from that point of view produces only bewilderment. But when he consults the oracle he draws on his experience only in order to reach a point where it does not count. The

response is in no way tailored to who he is. It is not the person in his ordinary capacity who consults the oracle; it is the victim of accident who as such knows only bewilderment. Nothing he says in his ordinary capacity matters. It is not that ordinary language is now restored to him and he can therefore speak about the accident drawing on what he knows. It is rather that the accident victim himself, the person who is, if we are allowed to say it, "beside himself," can speak as such. To the greatest possible degree, he is deprived of his subjectivity and this is an asset. It would only get in the way. Once the chicken is fed *benge* poison, the victim speaks only in his capacity of someone subject to accident. His own speech, once again, is not restored. Rather, now he speaks as someone who cannot speak in an ordinary way on the topic of accident, but who in an extraordinary way can expect a response to a sentence that arises out of bewilderment. Someone, something is listening. His bewilderment is the very basis of his speech.

He is not a free subject; he has been drained of his subjectivity, of his experience, for the moment. But he puts himself aside, as it were. In this way, he avoids trauma, the relation between the speaking subject and his memories felt to be inadequate. With the consultation of the oracle, there is no previously defined speaker. The "speaker" here is an effect of the oracle. Only because the oracle is present can he speak as he does. The man who announces the identity of the witch after consulting an oracle does not tell of his experience. He merely repeats what the oracle has said. He is bound by it. The lack of a sublime moment, of a separation from a power that overwhelms, which was his infliction up till that moment, becomes his triumph. He is still subjected to an obscure power, but now it grants him the right to speak, or, more accurately, it speaks through him.

Not by working through his suffering, which would be his acceptance of it and the reunification of himself, but through the use of the very fragmentation of his identity which made him think of witchcraft, the victim regains himself. As one of those fragments, he finds a place for himself in the social and thus aides in making witchcraft an institution. There was thus created a class of people in Azande society, "victims of witchcraft." This was not an exclusive identity; it did not replace ordinary social identity, but stood beside it, making these victims like those curers who, in trance, assume the names of spirits but who, outside of trance, are normal people. The making of witchcraft into an institution depended on giving

it a place while at the same time keeping it apart from normality.

This solution, if that is the correct word, could only work intermittently. "Institutionalizing witchcraft," accident in its worked-out form, meant locking it up, as one might do to someone disturbed. Not at all to cure it, but to be make it capable of being released in order to roam society once more. Thus, witchcraft replaced another fear which lacked a name and hence a means of response.

Consulting the oracle, someone or some thing speaks in my place, and as a result, I can speak. In my place, where I am not, someone else appears. This "not me" substitutes for me and hides the multiple subjects caused by accident and expressed through suspicion.

Witches can mean nothing unless they are inflected by whatever it is that the oracle can bring from a distance that cannot be measured in human terms and that can be reached by humans only through ritual means. But this distance only comes into being with the production of a third person out of the substance of the disabled speaker. In my place, where I was, are the hidden remnants of uncertainties which prevent me from speaking authoritatively. These multiple uncertainties remain hidden only by the insistence that I am in face of an alterity completely different than me. This entity speaks to me and, being univocal, speaks authoritatively. It marks the place where there is something I must know. Such an alterity overpowers me, and I am grateful to it for doing so. *En face* of it, the phantasm of the witch, richer than any stereotype, emerges.

For Blanchot, the narrator's voice issues against a negativity which it cannot recapture. Such, too, is the case with the Azande oracle which, speaking of witches, speaks of death. The certainty of knowing a particular menace of death adjoins the impossibility of saying definitively what death is, where it comes from. Thus, witches reappear within a "strange institution." For Evans-Pritchard, Azande witches were not uncanny, but we have disputed his assessment. Evans-Pritchard, in making this judgment, made Azande witches a form of the sublime. Azande, overwhelmed by a force they could not comprehend, nonetheless gave a name to the phenomenon and thus separated themselves from it. Once again, the reappearance of suspicion and witchcraft shows that this separation was never completed. With the oracle, however, it seems as though certainty was achieved. The

oracle asserts that there is a capacity to know whose provenance is not within me, but in someone or something from a distant place. The oracle established an other. And in doing so also claimed that this other could name, hence dissolve, the uncanny. It is this, finally, that institutionalized the witch.