The Notion of Witchcraft explains Unfortunate Events

Witches, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist. None the less, the concept of witchcraft provides them with a natural philosophy by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events. Witchcraft beliefs also embrace a system of values which regulate human conduct.

Witchcraft is ubiquitous. It plays its part in every activity of Zande life; in agricultural, fishing, and hunting pursuits; in domestic life of homesteads as well as in communal life of district and court; it is an important theme of mental life in which it forms the background of a vast panorama of oracles and magic; its influence is plainly stamped on law and morals, etiquette and religion; it is prominent in technology and language; there is no niche or corner of Zande culture into which it does not twist itself. If blight seizes the ground-nut crop it is witchcraft; if the bush is vainly scoured for game it is witchcraft; if women laboriously bale water out of a pool and are rewarded by but a few small fish it is witchcraft; if termites do not rise when their swarming is due and a cold useless night is spent in waiting for their flight it is witchcraft; if a prince is cold and distant with his subject it is witchcraft; if a magical rite fails to achieve its purpose it is witchcraft; if, in fact, any failure or misfortune falls upon anyone at any time and in relation to any of the manifold activities of his life it may be due to witchcraft. The Zande attributes all these misfortunes to witchcraft unless there is strong evidence, and subsequent oracular confirmation, that sorcery or some other evil agent has been at work, or unless they are clearly to be attributed to incompetence, breach of a taboo, or failure to observe a moral rule.
CHAPTER VIII

The Poison Oracle in Daily Life

II

The method of revealing what is hidden by administering poison to fowls has a wide extension in Africa; but just as the Azande are the most north-easterly people who have the notion of witchcraft as a material substance in the belly, so also is their culture the north-easterly limit of the distribution of this type of oracle. They are the only people in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan who employ it.

The poison used is a red powder manufactured from a forest creeper and mixed with water to a paste. The liquid is squeezed out of the paste into the beaks of small domestic fowls which are compelled to swallow it. Generally violent spasms follow. The doses sometimes prove fatal, but as often the fowls recover. Sometimes they are even unaffected by the poison. From the behaviour of fowls under this ordeal, especially by their death or survival, Azande receive answers to the questions they place before the oracle.

Azande observe the action of the poison oracle as we observe it, but their observations are always subordinated to their beliefs and are incorporated into their beliefs and made to explain them and justify them. Let the reader consider any argument that would utterly demolish all Zande claims for the power of the oracle. If it were translated into Zande modes of thought it would serve to support their entire structure of belief. For their mystical notions are eminently coherent, being inter-related by a network of logical ties, and are so ordered that they never too crudely contradict sensory experience but, instead, experience seems to justify them. The Zande is immersed in a sea of mystical notions, and if he speaks about his poison oracle he must speak in a mystical idiom.

If we cannot account for Zande faith in their poison oracle by assuming that they are aware that it is a poison and are willing to abide by the chance of its action on different fowls we might seek to comprehend it by supposing that they personify it. Given a mind, the Zande oracle is not much more difficult to understand than the Delphic Oracle. But they do not personify it. For, though it would seem to us that they must regard the oracles as personal beings, since they address them directly; in fact the question appears absurd when framed in the Zande tongue. A boro, a person, has two hands and two feet, a head, a belly, and so on, and the poison oracle has none of these things. It is not alive, it does not breathe or move about. It is a thing. Azande have no theory about it; they do not know why it works, but only that it does work. Oracles have always existed and have always worked as they work now because such is their nature.

If you press a Zande to explain how the poison oracle can see far-off things he will say that its mbisimo, its soul, sees them. It might be urged that if the poison oracle has a soul it must be animate. Here we are up against the difficulty that always arises when a native word is translated by an English word. I have translated the Zande word mbisimo as 'soul' because the notion this word expresses in our own culture is nearer to the Zande notion of mbisimo of persons than any other English word. The concepts are not identical, and when in each language the word is used in a number of extended senses it is no longer possible to use the original expressions in translation without risk of confusion and gross distortion. In saying that the poison oracle has a mbisimo Zande mean little more than 'it does something' or, as we would say, 'it is dynamic'. You ask them how it works and they reply, 'It has a soul.' If you were to ask them how they know it has a 'soul', they would reply that they know because it works. They are explaining mystical action by naming it. The word mbisimo describes and explains all action of a mystical order.