

CULTURE AND CAUSALITY: NON-WESTERN SYSTEMS OF EXPLANATION

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I

INTRODUCTION

Leave it to an anthropologist to claim that the scientific reasoning on which modern Western society depends is just another of the many systems humans have developed to explain the way things work. As a card-carrying anthropologist, I will say it as clearly as possible: Science is but one of many systems of thought, and it would do us well to think of it as satisfying the needs of a particular society and culture. Yes, science provides the basis for putting men on the moon and allowing women to decide whether to be pregnant. Because it works so well as a system of explanation and prediction in our society, we tend to dismiss alternatives outright. For many, the judgment that something is “non-scientific” is the basis for dismissal, disinterest, and disbelief.

I propose that we suspend disbelief for a moment to look into the logic of some other systems of thought, explanation, and prediction to learn what we can about their sociocultural contexts and their functions in other cultures. Let the laboratory of anthropology be a stage on which we watch some dramas about human dilemmas and ask whether the essential themes these stories in other cultures present have any relevance for Western society. It will be immediately apparent that these stories are not about our own lives, but about what truths, if any, they may represent about the human quest to understand causes and effects.

II

THE FIRST DRAMA: A GRANARY TUMBLES DOWN IN THE SUDAN

In his classic ethnography of the Azande people of the Western Sudan in Africa, E.E. Evans-Pritchard describes the misfortune of a man who took shelter from the sun in the shade of a granary.¹ The Azande use the granaries to store the bounty of their grain crops. In this area of unpredictable rainfall and

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1. See E.E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, *WITCHCRAFT, ORACLES AND MAGIC AMONG THE AZANDE* 69-70 (1937).

frequent drought, famine is a common problem. When there is a bountiful harvest, it must be preserved for periods when there is none. The granaries are made of sun-dried clay and perched several inches off the ground to protect them from both puddles of rainwater and hungry or adventurous vermin. The perches are made from wood and are usually sturdy enough to support a granary that is heavy with stored grain.

Evans-Pritchard tells us the story of a man who sat in the shade of a particular granary, leaned against a supporting perch, and died as it crumbled and the granary fell on top of him.² In our system of thought, we might say that the man was negligent not to check the strength of the supporting structure before leaning on it, or that the owner ought to be held responsible for not keeping his granary in good repair. Whichever way we go initially, we may, in the end, label the man's misfortune an accident. But this is not how the Azande approach the matter. They do not call an event like this, or other misfortunes such as a person falling and breaking a limb after tripping on a root, accidents. Rather, they see such things occurring as a result of witchcraft or sorcery.³ Moreover, the Azande distinguish these causes: witchcraft, caused by human malevolence but unintentional and unknown even to the perpetrator; and sorcery, caused by similar human malevolence but intentional and known to the perpetrator.⁴ Either kind can kill. Either kind can be the basis of a death resulting from a tumbling granary or personal injury resulting from a fall. As Freud claimed, in another time and place, so do the Azande: There are no accidents per se. Behind a person's misfortune lies another person who caused it.⁵

Evans-Pritchard describes how the process of locating suspects—typically those who act in deviant, antisocial ways, some of the main characteristics of witches and sorcerers—and purging the community of the evil they have caused serve as primary mechanisms of social cohesion.⁶ On such occasions, the Azande come together, name the social deviants, and select one or more of them to be punished or ostracized.⁷

But do they not know that the granary fell because the wood was rotten or had been eaten by termites? Do they not understand that the impact of a fall can break a limb? In other words, is there no understanding of the "scientific" causes of phenomena? These are the questions we seem compelled by our culture to ask of theirs. The answer seems to be this: The Azande do know that a blow breaks bones and that wood can rot or be eaten by termites. They know these things as we know them. They observe, see, and know the mechanics of falling objects, be they granaries or human beings. But for them, scientific explanation misses the point. It fails to take into account the reasons these

2. *See id.*

3. *See id.*

4. *See id.*

5. *See* SIGMUND FREUD, *THE PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF EVERYDAY LIFE* 53-105 (Hogarth Press 1960) (1901).

6. *See* EVANS-PRITCHARD, *supra* note 1, at 84-107.

7. *See id.*

mechanisms were put into operation in the first place. Witches and sorcerers (in other words, evil people) are the causes of the accidents. In Western cultures, misfortunes may be explained as accidents or acts of God; thus, Western cultures do not go as far as the Azande in the process of assigning causality to humans.

III

THE SECOND DRAMA: HOW CERTAIN SOUTH AMERICAN INDIANS SAY THE WORLD BEGAN

Perhaps the greatest epic in Western literature is the drama in the Book of Genesis about the creation of the world in seven days. In that drama, God created the universe out of nothingness, made the earth and separated water from dry land, created animals and plants, and eventually created human beings before resting on the seventh day.⁸ An alternative version of the story of creation is the big bang theory, which relates energy, matter, and an ever-expanding universe in a process of creation that has no foreseeable end.⁹

These stories tell us that humans want, and seem to need, to explain how things came to be. In the Genesis story, God is the creator of everything. In the big bang theory, matter and energy are, and from them all else eventually follows. What the big bang theory does not do is attribute the instantiation of the universe to a creator. Rather, it speaks of the mechanism whereby it came into existence.

Anthropologist Greg Urban writes about the Shokleng people of Amazonia, whose lives are no longer untouched by the modern world.¹⁰ The fact that Urban studied them is evidence enough of that point. He was able to collect and write down their version of the beginning of the world. If we took the time, we would find it interesting to study the details of Shokleng stories—their beauty as literary forms with poetics, rhythm, and referents—that draw on a vastly different cultural tradition. We need not do that to understand one of Urban's essential conclusions from studying the Shokleng texts. The stories are told in such a way, because of the grammatical structure and rhetorical priorities of their language, that their epic of creation tells what happened without making reference to an agent lying behind creation—no human actors, no supernatural ones, no gods of any sort were responsible for the creation of the world. Urban asks his readers to understand it this way: Think about the creation story in Genesis and rework it according to Shokleng priorities.¹¹ It would be like this: “On the first day, the world got created. On the second, the heavens and the earth came into being. On the third, the waters and the land became sepa-

8. See *Genesis* 1-3.

9. See STEVEN WEINBERG, *THE FIRST THREE MINUTES: A MODERN VIEW OF THE ORIGIN OF THE UNIVERSE* (1977).

10. See Greg Urban, *Agent- and Patient-Centricity in Myth*, 94 *J. AM. FOLKLORE* 323 (1981).

11. See GREG URBAN, *A DISCOURSE-CENTERED APPROACH TO CULTURE: NATIVE SOUTH AMERICAN MYTHS AND RITUALS* 47-48 (1991).

rated.” And so on. It would be a story about what happened but not about who did it.

IV

THE THIRD DRAMA: ACCIDENTS AND WITCHES IN EAST AFRICA

Two years spent in East Africa as a graduate student gave me the material for a doctoral dissertation and a host of anecdotes, including some stories that demonstrate some essential facts about how people in a different culture approach life, deal with problems, and explain human existence. One example is about a man who asked me whether it really was a different time in America from what the sun and the clock indicated in East Africa. Aside from my insistence that it was, I decided to show him with a laboratory experiment. I took an orange (one of the things that is bountiful in the part of rural Tanzania where I lived) and a flashlight (one of the things that is not bountiful, but something I was fortunate enough to own) and attempted to demonstrate how sunlight hits the earth at different angles as the earth rotates. I was not far into my explanation before I realized that behind this experiment lay any number of scientific facts that I had internalized and believed but had no means of proving. Did I really know that the world was round, despite Copernicus and Columbus? Did I really know that it is the earth that does the rotating and not the sun? Was this how light really worked? I quickly called a halt to my shoddy effort and gave into the man's reasoning that the time must be the same in America because it was the same in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and all the places he knew about. Claiming that their time was different was just another one of those ways that the Americans were trying to prove their superiority. I had to agree that he had a point.

The dramas I want to relate from East Africa are not about my foibles in understanding or explaining things but instead deal with how some rural Tanzanians approached the issue of cause and effect and thus, in legal terms, blame and responsibility. Here is one example. A man is driving a car to work. The car hits a tree. Both the car and the tree are damaged. Note that I have tried to state these facts as “objectively” as possible. I avoided blame and responsibility and all talk about what caused what. I have tried to talk like the Shokleng by saying only what happened but not who did it. What the Tanzanians might say is this: “My car and that tree, they collided with one another.” This story also lacks agency, but it will not go over well in the logic of introduced law or insurance. For them, we need to know who was driving and what actions the driver took or did not take that might have caused the collision. If pressed, the Tanzanians can answer these questions, but the point is that they do not necessarily do so as the first order of business. Their language and their culture encourages talk about what happened in ways that seem, to us, to be lacking essential information.

In another incident in a rural village where I lived, a man came to me to say that he needed help to go to the police some miles away. A woman had come

down out of the mountains, entered the house of a neighbor, and hacked his cow to death with a machete. The kitchen area was a mess, the source of milk for the man's family was dead, and his property had been damaged. Could I help by driving to the police station to report the incident? As we were talking, others put forth a countervailing argument against involving the police. If the police become involved, they will almost surely arrest the wrong person and the courts will not punish the real culprit. "Who was that?" I asked. Did I not know? Did I not realize that the woman was only a sorcerer's assistant and that it was her brother, to whom she had been returned following divorce, who had harmed the cow of a man? As it turned out, the victim had been the woman's former husband. She had come down from her brother's homestead into her former husband's homestead and killed his cow. But she was only the mechanical apparatus through which the sorcerer had worked his evil. The police would arrest her because she had held the machete, but she was not the motivator, the instigator, the guilty party. Their logic would fail to get to the root of the problem. They would see this as a simple problem of proximate cause and direct effect, thereby failing to understand the larger issues of blame and essential responsibility. The villagers were talking about causation, about how things work, and about knowing how things work. They concluded that scientific thought would fail. It would stop short of understanding more than the mechanistic processes of a woman wielding a knife and killing a cow. Everyone could see that was what happened, but it was not *what really happened*.

V

THE FINAL DRAMA: BEING RIGHT OR LIVING A QUIET LIFE

The case law contains some cases so famous that even I, a non-lawyer, know about the principles of law derived from them. *Palsgraf v. Long Island Rail Road Company*¹² is such a case. It tells of a Rube Goldberg-like chain reaction and the problem of deciding how far along the chain of events to go in assigning legal responsibility. Although I failed in East Africa to recreate my grammar school teacher's experiment using an orange and a flashlight, I did, during this past sabbatical year in Italy, do quite well in recreating *Palsgraf*. I invited a group of friends to dinner one night. We ate on the terrace of my rented penthouse apartment overlooking the Adriatic in Pescara. The dinner lasted quite some time. We consumed a lot of food and drink over three or four hours in a style I have come to think of as uniquely Italian; most Americans I know seem far too busy or preoccupied to spend so much time at the table. Late at night, someone kicked the table, causing a wine bottle to fall and roll to the edge of the terrace. It slipped under the railing and dropped six floors onto the roof of a car whereupon the car alarm sounded, people appeared in windows and on porches to see what had happened, and a small crowd gathered around the car. I brought my American logic to the situation: "How are they going to know

12. 162 N.E. 99 (N.Y. 1928).

from which balcony the bottle fell?" (There were five more between mine and the car below.) "How are they going to prove whose bottle it was?" (I couldn't imagine any of my well-oiled guests being very able or willing to speak up.) I offered the obstinate opinion that I would love to see how this case worked out in an Italian small claims court; I'd written a book about American small claims¹³ and the comparison seemed interesting.

At this point in my ramblings, a friend turned to me and said, "You have a very important decision to make: Do you want to be right, or do you want to live a quiet life?" Like the Sudanese and the Tanzanians, this Italian did not choose to see this problem as one of developing the correct explanation for how the bottle came to damage the car. He saw a scientific approach (assembling facts, testing rival hypotheses, and developing a causal explanation) as hopelessly inadequate to the task of restoring social harmony. No amount of science could do that, and there was no point in pursuing such a line of thought. He preferred, and was sure I would too, an approach that asks what is important here, what needs to be done to achieve the desired ends, and how does the course of events need to be directed at this point?

VI

CONCLUSION

Now you might ask why I have bothered to tell so many stories in this essay. What do they have to do with scientific evidence and the law? Perhaps not much. But then again, perhaps quite a lot. The Azande episode demonstrates how that group understands the mechanical way things happen, as well as their conviction that such an explanation is not very important in the grand scheme of things. Their cosmology does not allow for accidents, if we are to believe in the accuracy of Evans-Pritchard's report, and the real questions about the "how's" and "why's" of things elude scientific explanations of causality.

The situation is oddly different in Amazonia. The Shokleng people depend neither on religion (that is, God or the gods are responsible) nor science (that is, these are the mechanics of how the world was created). Rather, their epistemology seems to satisfy them when it explains how things are, not why or where they come from. If Urban is right, here too is a system of thought where the questions science asks, and the answers it gives, are of little use.

In both Tanzania and Italy, there are problems with the adequacy of scientific explanation. Yes, a man maneuvered a car in such a manner that it eventually ran into a tree. But that is not how they tell the story nor what they prioritize as important information about how the world works. The Italian case illustrates that even if we *can* work out the causal chain of events scientifically, it may be of little use in solving legal problems. For them, it is more important to think of what one must do to settle crises and to live a peaceful life than it is

13. See JOHN M. CONLEY & WILLIAM M. O'BARR, *RULES VERSUS RELATIONSHIPS: THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF LEGAL DISCOURSE* (1990).

to affirm the most plausible explanation of causality in a complex chain of events.