



## Sexual Inversion among the Azande

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*American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 72, No. 6 (Dec., 1970), 1428-1434.

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*American Anthropologist* is currently published by American Anthropological Association.

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## SEXUAL INVERSION AMONG THE AZANDE

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*Male and female homosexual relationship seems to have been common among the Azande in past times. Between males it was approved of in the bachelor military companies. Between females it is said to have been a frequent, though highly disapproved of, practice in polygamous homes. [Sudan (southern); Azande; sexual inversion]*

Accepted for publication 16 January 1970.

It is beyond question that male homosexuality, or rather a sexual relationship between young warriors and boys, was common in

pre-European days among the Azande, and as Czekanowski (1924:56), citing Junker (1892: 3-4), has pointed out, there is no reason to suppose that it was introduced by Arabs as some have thought. All Azande I have known well enough to discuss this matter have asserted also that female homosexuality (lesbianism) was practiced in polygamous homes in the past and still (1930) is sometimes. This paper brings together information about both practices and presents translations of a few texts on the subject taken down from Azande of the Sudan forty years ago.

Before European rule was imposed on the Azande there was a good deal of fighting between kingdoms (Evans-Pritchard 1957b, 1957c). Part of the adult male population of each kingdom was organized in military companies of *abakumba* 'married men' and *aparanga* 'bachelors'; the same companies, besides their military functions, served at courts in various capacities and were called on for labor in the royal and princely cultivations (Evans-Pritchard 1957a). In this account we do not have to refer again to the companies of married men. It was the custom for members of bachelor companies, some of whom would always be living in barracks at court, to take boy-wives. This was undoubtedly brought about by the scarcity of marriageable women in the days when the nobility and also the richer commoners kept large harems and were able to do so because bridewealth was hard to come by and they were able to acquire it more easily than poorer men. Most young men consequently married late—well into their twenties and thirties—and, because girls were engaged (in a legal sense married) very young, often at birth, the only way youths could obtain satisfaction from a woman was in adultery. But that was a very dangerous solution to a young man's problem, for the fine his father would have to pay was heavy—twenty spears and a woman, which meant in effect the payment of two women to the husband; it sometimes happened that the husband was so enraged that he refused compensation and chose instead to mutilate the offender, cutting off his ears, upper lip, genitals, and hands. So, the risk being too great, it was the custom for cautious bachelors in the military companies who were living at court, if they were not content to masturbate—a practice to which no shame is attached, though a young man would not do it in public—to marry boys and satisfy their sexual needs with them. A youth of

position in his company might have more than one boy (*kumba gude*). To these boys their warrior mates were *badiya ngbanga* 'court lovers.'

That it was on account of the difficulties of getting satisfaction in heterosexual relationships that boy marriage was a recognized temporary union is, I believe, shown by the fact that boy marriage has in post-European times entirely disappeared. It is true that the military companies disappeared also; but Azande, I think rightly, attribute the giving up of the custom to its having become easier for youths to marry and, in the general breakdown of morals and of the suppression of customary punishments, to indulge in adultery and fornication. Boy marriage was owing, Azande say, to *zanga ade* 'lack of women.' As one man put it, "What man would prefer a boy to a woman? A man would be a fool to do so. The love of boys arose from lack of women." So the Azande in my day spoke of it as *kuru pai* 'old custom,' though I have never heard anyone speak of sleeping with a boy with distaste—at worst it is regarded as something of a joke; even in my time one heard it said of a man that he used to be some well-known older man's boy much as we in England might say that someone at school was fag to some celebrity. It should also be made clear that, as in ancient Greece, so far as one can judge, when the boy-wives grew up and when they and their husbands married females they had a normal married life like everyone else. There were no urnings in the modern European sense.

The custom of boy marriage had died out before I first visited Zandeland, and as direct observation no longer was possible, I had to rely on statements about the past, but such statements by senior men were unanimous. I have pointedly used the terms "wife," "husband," and "marriage," for, as the texts will make clear, the relationship was, for so long as it lasted, a legal union on the model of a normal marriage. The warrior paid bride-wealth (some five spears or more) to the parents of his boy and performed services for them as he would have done had he married their daughter; if he proved to be a good son-in-law they might later replace the son by a daughter. Also, if another man had relations with his boy he could, I was told, sue him at court for adultery.

The boys were "women": "*Ade nga ami*," they would say, "we are women." A boy was

addressed by his lover as *diare* 'my wife,' and the boy addressed him as *kumbani* 'my husband.' The boys used to eat out of sight of the warriors in the same way as women do not eat in the presence of their husbands. The boys performed many of the smaller services a woman performs daily for her husband, such as gathering leaves for his ablutions, gathering leaves for his bed, drawing water and breaking off firewood for him, helping him in hoeing his father's cultivations, bearing messages for him, and bringing him cooked provisions from his home to court to supplement those provided by the prince; but he did not cook porridge for him. With regard to these services it should be borne in mind that a young man at court had no mother or sisters to look after him there. Also, the boy-wife carried his husband's shield when on a journey. It should be understood that he performed these services lest it might be thought that the relationship was entirely of a sexual nature; it will be appreciated that it had an educational side to it. With regard to the sexual side, at night the boy slept with his lover, who had intercourse with him between his thighs (Azande expressed disgust at the suggestion of anal penetration). The boys got what pleasure they could by friction of their organs on the husband's belly or groin. However, even though there was this side to the relationship, it was clear from Zande accounts that there was also the comfort of a nightly sharing of the bed with a companion.

The word "boy" (*kumba gude*) must, it would appear, be interpreted liberally, for as far as I could judge from what I was told the lads might have been anywhere between about twelve and twenty years of age. When they ceased to be boys they joined the companies of warriors to which their at-one-time husbands belonged and took boys to wife on their own account; so the period of marriage was also one of apprenticeship. I cannot present figures for boy marriages, but the practice was certainly both accepted and common. I obtained lists of a succession of such marriages from several senior men but there would be little profit after this lapse of time (sixty-five years after King Gbudwe's death) in recording just strings of names.

Before giving the texts it should be further stated that some members of the noble ruling class indulged in homosexual intercourse. In the main these were those young sons of

princes who hung about court till their fathers saw fit to give them wives and districts to administer. They kept well away from their fathers' harems and took commoner boys as servants and for sexual pleasure. It appears also that a prince, however many wives he might have, might sleep with a boy rather than by himself during the night before consulting the poison oracle, for intercourse with a woman was taboo on these occasions. It was said that *kumba gude na gberesa nga benge te* 'a boy does not spoil the poison oracle.' Otherwise I have heard of only one senior prince—deposed by the administration—who, although he had several wives, still habitually slept with boys. For this and other reasons he was regarded by Azande as slightly crazy. One must not jump to conclusions, as Czekanowski did on what Junker had recorded about boys accompanying a Zande prince wherever he went; all kings and princes are accompanied by pages who are treated by their masters with notable indulgence in contrast with the severe aloofness with which their seniors are usually treated.

Text (Evans-Pritchard 1963a:277-280) was taken down from Kuagbiaru, a man well acquainted with the court life of the past who had himself been a boy-wife and, as head of a company of warriors at the court of Prince Gangura, several times a husband to boys.

In the past men used to have sexual relations with boys as they did with wives. A man paid compensation to another if he had relations with his boy. People asked for the hand of a boy with a spear, just as they asked for the hand of a maiden of her parents.<sup>1</sup> All those young warriors who were at court, all had their boys. Those huts of the young men which were around the court, all their boy-loves were in those huts. They built their huts large and long, and there were many youths to each hut, each in his own place, together with their captain. Their boy-loves also slept in the huts. When night fell they all kindled fires in front of their husbands' beds, each kindled a fire in front of his lover's bed. When the young warriors began to be very hungry at court they sent their boy-loves to their [the boys'] parents to fetch food for them. Their boy-loves went and returned with fine lots of porridge and cooked fowls and beer. The relatives of a boy escorted him [when he was married] in the same way as they escorted a bride [on her marriage] to her husband with much good food. However, the boys did not cook porridge for their lovers themselves; they

cooked manioc and sweet potatoes for their lovers. It was their mothers [the boys'] who cooked porridge in their homes, and nice meats; and some of them cooked fowls. They collected all these lots of food together where their husbands were. All these youths and their loves, there was no forgetfulness of the boys' part about giving food to the lovers. But that porridge which they gave them, they broke off part of it together with part of the meats to hide it for their husbands, for they were like wives.<sup>2</sup> Their lovers did not approve of their laughing loud like men, they desired them to speak softly, as women speak.

When all the young warriors went to hoe the prince's cultivations each took his love with him. When they reached the cultivations they built a big hut for their captain and they set up a palisade around it. In this enclosure, filled with boys, otherwise was the captain alone. Then the youths began to build their little shelters adjacent to the hut of the captain, and they stretched far, crossing streams. But all their boys were in the enclosure they had erected for the captain. When it was dusk the boys scattered, each to the hut of his lover to kindle a fire there for his lover. Each went to kindle a fire in the hut of his own lover. Next morning they gathered together in the enclosure of the captain. No youth could enter there without permission. The captain gave them their meals behind the enclosure. Only if the captain felt well-disposed towards him might he summon one of the senior youths into the enclosure to share his meal with him. All the rest of them never entered the enclosure; they saw their loves at night. The youths hoed the cultivations till evening and then they returned to their sleeping places. Their loves had already made their husbands' beds and kindled fires for them in their huts.

Text (Evans-Pritchard 1962:16-17) was taken down from Ganga, one of King Gbudwe's captains of companies of warriors.

This is about how men married boys when Gbudwe was lord of his domains. In those days, if a man had relations with the wife of another the husband killed him or he cut off his hands and his genitals. So for that reason a man used to marry a boy to have orgasm between his thighs, which quieted his desire for a woman. If this boy was a good wife to his husband five spears might be paid for him, and for another as many as ten might be paid. A husband who was liberal to his in-laws, they would later give him a woman, saying that good for a boy, how much better for a woman; so if he married a girl his in-laws would greatly profit, and so they gave him a wife [girl]. This his boy, he did not abide

seeing another near him; they would quarrel, and if they took the matter before [King] Gbudwe, Gbudwe told the one who went after the other's boy to pay him spears [in compensation] since he had gone after the other's boy. Also there were some men who, although they had [female] wives, still married boys. When war broke out they took their boys with them,<sup>3</sup> but they did not take them to the place of fighting; the boys remained behind in the camp, for they were like women; and they collected firewood for their husbands and plucked *nzawa* leaves [for the toilet] and they cooked meals for when their husbands returned from the fighting. They did for their husbands everything a wife does for her husband. They drew water and presented it before their husbands on their knees and they took food and brought it to them, and the husbands washed their hands and ate this meal and then recounted what had happened in the fighting to their boy-wives.

So far something has been said about male homosexuality. What about lesbianism? That also must be regarded as a product, like male homosexuality, of polygamy on a large scale; for if this precluded young men from normal sex, so in large polygamous homes it prevented the wives, or some of them, from receiving the amount of sexual attention they wished for from their common husband, who, moreover, might well have been elderly and not at the height of his sexual vigor. Though men have slightly different habits, it can be said generally that a woman who is one of three wives would not sleep with her husband more than some ten nights a month, one of six wives more than five nights, and so on. One of the many wives of a prince or of an important commoner in the past might not have shared her husband's bed for a month or two, whereas some of the dozens, even hundreds, of wives of a king must have been almost totally deprived of the sex life normal in smaller homes. Adulterous intercourse was very difficult for a wife in such large polygamous families, for the wives were kept in seclusion and carefully watched; death on discovery, or even on suspicion, would have been the penalty for both the wife and her lover.

It was in such polygamous families, Azande say, that lesbianism was practiced. Obviously I had no opportunity of knowing anything about it by observation, so that I can only tell what I was told (by males only, though women admitted that some women practiced it). Wives would cut a sweet potato or manioc

root in the shape of the male organ, or use a banana for the purpose. Two of them would shut themselves in a hut and one would lie on the bed and play the female role while the other, with the artificial organ tied round her stomach, played the male role. They then reversed roles.

Women were certainly underprivileged in old Zande society, and it is a further indication of male dominance that what was encouraged among males was condemned among females. Zande men, princes especially, have a horror of lesbianism, and they regard it as highly dangerous, being more or less equivalent to *adandara*, a kind of cat born, it is believed, of women (Evans-Pritchard 1937:51-56). It would be fatal were a man to see one of these women suckling her kittens. I have heard it said that some of the great kings of the past—Bazingbi, Gbudwe, Wando, and others—died on account of lesbian practices between their wives, and it is alleged that in Gbudwe's home one of his senior wives, Nanduru, a wizened old lady in my day, executed several of his cowives for this offense. Some Azande have told me that lesbianism was much practiced by daughters and sisters of ruling nobles in whose homes they lived in an incestuous relationship. A ruler might give a girl slave to one of his daughters, who would anoint and paint the girl to make her attractive and then lie with her. Azande further say that once a woman has started homosexual intercourse she is likely to continue it because she is then her own master and may have gratification when she pleases and not just when a man cares to give it to her, and the gratification may also last as long as she pleases.

It would seem, if Zande statements are correct, that a lesbian relationship is often brought about in the first instance by a simple rite. When two women are very friendly they may seek to give formality to their friendship through a ceremony called *bagburu*, having obtained permission from their husbands to do so. A husband finds it difficult to refuse his consent for it would not normally mean that any sexual element was involved. One of the women makes a small gift to the other and the other makes a return gift. They then take a maize cob and divide it, and each plants the seeds of her half in her garden.<sup>4</sup> Later the women perform various mutual services and will from time to time exchange gifts. However, though a husband may give his consent he may

do so with reluctance because Zande men think that this bond of friendship between women may be a respectable cover for homosexual intimacies.

Text (Evans-Pritchard 1963b:13-14) was taken down from Kuagbiaru.

Among the Azande many women do the same as men. There are many of them who have intercourse among themselves as a husband with his wife. Lesbianism began with a maize the name of which is *kaima*, a maize with a cob red like blood. They take this cob and utter a spell over it in the same way as men utter a spell over the blood in making blood-brotherhood; and when that is done one of them [the two women] takes hold of the top of it on her side and the other takes hold of the bottom of it for her part and they break it between them. After this they should not call each other by their proper names, but they call each other *bagburu*. The one who is the wife cooks porridge and a fowl and brings them to the one who is the husband. They do this between them many times. They have sexual intercourse between them with sweet potatoes carved into the shape of a circumcised penis, with carved manioc also, and also with bananas. At the top it is just like the male organ. The husband dislikes her wife conversing with other women. She beats her wife just as a husband beats his wife for bad behaviour, such as going with a man. However, when Gbudwe was alive he was very much opposed to anything to do with lesbianism.

Text (Evans-Pritchard) was taken down from Kisanga, a man with a very wide knowledge of Zande customs.

Women get together and one says to another "Oh my friend, you, why don't you like me mistress!" The other replies "O lady, my mistress, why should I bear you ill-will?" The first says "Lady, come the day after tomorrow as I have a little something to tell you." She replies "Eh lady, what is it that you do not now tell me? For unless you tell it to me now I cannot survive the night waiting to hear it!" So the one tells the other "Lady, I am greatly in love with you. O lady how shall we manage this horrible husband?"

"Hm! Eh lady, do they keep all that watch on a woman lady!"

"Ahe lady, let us play a trick. You come after my husband and we will make a pact of love-friendship (*bagburu*) between us and he will think it is just a friendship between women, and you lady can pleasure me." She adds "Early tomorrow you come with a little gift for him." Early in the morning she takes a gift, such as a

spear, and she comes to visit the husband in his home. She says to the husband:

"So, will you listen well to what I am going to say to you?"

"Lady, say what the lady has come to my home here for."

"Eh sir, sir it is about my friend, master. I said to myself sir that I would come to ask the prince about her; no man am I who could deceive you with a woman."

He says "O lady may be I shall consent."

"O sir by your head! O sir by your head! Let me have the woman sir. Sir I will grind her flour for her, and if she is sick I will gather her fire-wood."

"I must consult the oracles first lady, I must consult the oracles first. I think I must first consult the oracles."

"Eh sir, does one refuse with a woman? Is she a man?"

"All right my friend, you leave the spear and go home and I will think the matter over."

She wipes the ground before him [thanks him], saying "O my master I go about by myself among people sir!" Then she goes home. She sleeps two nights and then grinds flour and she comes with flour and porridge. When she appears on the path her lover runs to meet her on the path:

"O my love, O my friend, O lady have you not come today?" She puts down the flour and porridge at the side of the homestead. Her lover takes a stool and puts it for her to be seated. The husband sulks:

"You have come my friend?"

"Yes sir."

"Lady let me be, I am feeling chilly today."

They take his food and bring it. He is embarrassed: "Child pour water over my hands." His wife goes and takes water and pours it over his hands. He says "Lady that is good, lady, it is good." He breaks off one lump of porridge. He sulks and goes on sulking, telling his daughters "Now then come on and take it away and give it to the children."

"Ahe sir! A person brings her food and a man is not well—it should not be given away, it should be kept for him to eat at another time?"

"Hm! Eh woman, does one argue with a father in this manner!" They deceive him. "Oh no sir, I am not disputing anything sir."

"Mistress I do not feel well today, today is not a good day for me. I shall retire."

"He! Look at that spying husband of mine lady, what an unpleasant character!"

The wife puts water before her lover as though she were her [male] husband. She has her penis in her bag—she takes it around with her. They carve a sweet potato into the shape of a circumcised penis. The woman-husband makes a hole through the sweet potato and then

ties it with cord through it to her loins so that she is like a male. She washes herself with water and anoints herself with oil.

Meanwhile the husband is eating his meal in the hut of his senior wife. He says to her: "O mistress since you have been a long time with me you have never done me ill. My wife, that which I have seen, do you see it too?"

"No sir, but I have an idea about it. I am not sure of things sir! Eh sir! As you are a man, in a matter of this kind why do you not hear what she has to say to satisfy yourself in your mind?"

He coughs: "All right, this death of mine they speak of, I will get to the bottom of it."

The two women get up to lie on the ground because their movements on the bed make a noise. The wife of the man says: "That spying husband of mine, he is nasty enough to try and trap people in a hut!"

"If he does he will die if he sees it. Madam do not weary yourself with thinking about women's affairs, you will see what happens."

"Let us do what we are going to do. Just stop talking about my husband." She makes her keep quiet by shaking her head at her while she takes her pleasure of her love. The husband comes and crouches in the porch and he hears the sounds of them in the hut; he hears the movement in the hut, as they say to each other "O my brother, O my darling, O my husband, O lady." He enters the hut and when they see him they rise from the ground. He seizes his wife and says (to the other woman):

"O my friend you kill me. I thought you had come to my home in goodwill, but it seems that it is my death you bring." Then he calls his senior wife:

"Mistress come here and see what evil has befallen me—this woman I have taken hold of together with her companion. . . ."

"Heyo! My husband, do you summon me to a woman's affair—your wives can be very malicious sir."

"Eh woman, we share a home with you in double-talk (*sanza*.) So you are all moved by wish for my death!"

"Hi! Leave off that talk with me—is it my fault that you went and entered the hut?"

Perhaps I should add in conclusion to this note that it is not of course being suggested that pederasty and tribadism are explained by social conditions such as those obtaining among the Azande. Obviously they are not. What is perhaps accounted for, given libidinous plasticity, are the institutional forms prevalent in Zande society and the (male) attitudes toward them.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A man asking a girl's parents for her hand

in marriage gave them a spear or two as a first installment of bridewealth. In the case of boys, the acceptance of a spear likewise constituted a legal marriage.

<sup>2</sup> In preparing a meal for guests a Zande wife often kept part of it back before serving it so that her husband could have a second meal secretly when the guests had departed.

<sup>3</sup> Intercourse with women was taboo for warriors during periods of fighting.

<sup>4</sup> The rite corresponds to exchange of blood among men. That it is copied from the latter is suggested by the blood-red maize cob (Evans-Pritchard 1933).

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#### BIRTH RATE AND WORK LOAD<sup>1</sup>

ETHEL NURGE

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*This paper explores the relationship between birth rate and work load. More babies are born in the period when there is less work to be done but there are also other factors relevant to the number of conceptions and these include opportunities for conception, physical stamina, schedule of physical activity, leisure patterns, holidays, knowledge of contraception, climate and household temperatures, and differential fertility. [Germany; birth and birth rate; birth control; population statistics; environmental factors]*

Accepted for publication 8 October 1969.

An unexpected bonus awaiting the anthropologist who works in a literate community is the vast store of written and published material

on which he may draw. This was brought home to me with great force when in 1966 I worked in a German peasant village. Burkhardts is a small agricultural, dairying community located in the Vogelsberg, an upland plateau area northeast of Frankfurt. For centuries, the village population size has been remarkably stable. Although there were years when numbers were reduced by disease, warfare, or emigration and a few periods when prosperity (and immigration?) raised the totals significantly, the population has been stable in general and, in particular, during the last ninety years has hovered around 500. Population totals for as early as 1630 are available, although the records are not complete and figures for some years are missing entirely.

Records of many types can be found—some in the village (in the mayor's office, in the church records) and others in the offices of various agencies within the political structure. The *Kreise*, or county, records, are most helpful as are those of the province. A record of births can be extracted from the church archives with patience and an understanding of the old German script. From the mayor's register I extracted a month-by-month record of the number of children born each year from 1886 to 1965 in the village of Burkhardts and became intrigued with the monthly birth rate differences.

Initially I entertained the hypothesis that the Burkhardtsers successfully planned their pregnancies and that as a result there are peak periods of birth corresponding to when the work load is lessened. There was some question as to when there was less work; initially, I thought it might be May and June when the stall work is minimal because the cows are out to pasture (but for June a contrary indication was that the haying begins in that month, which can mean arduous labor indeed). On a sheer probability basis the number of children born each month over a significantly long enough period (and I had an eighty-year record) should have been roughly the same. The total births during the eighty-year period were 736 and one twelfth is 61.33; only four months have total births near this figure: May, 63, June, 60, August, 63, and September, 61. On the other hand, the eighty-year total of births in November was 39 and for March, 86.

The hypothesis was tested by assuming that if no factors affected the months when infants were born, no month would be significantly