

# The symbolization of a snake and tree among the devotees of the zar spirit in Sudan

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## Abstract

This paper deals with a symbolic interpretation of the structural position that the snake and the tree possess in the local worship of the zar spirit within the borders of Islamic Sudan. The paper at hand aims to study, via bibliographic research, how the snake Azrag Banda, a manifestation of zar, and his tree-abode are regarded as significant symbols in the Sudanese zar *tumbura*, a self-nominated Islamic practice and spirit-possession cult with therapeutic functions. The snake Azrag Banda and his tree play a special role in the life of the cult and are meaningful symbols due to the collective historical experience of the Sudani, the devotees of zar *tumbura*. As it will be shown, the main characteristic of the Sudani Self is a past of slavery and displacement and a present of living on the margins of Sudanese society. In this regard, the current article aims at indicating what the snake entity Azrag Banda and his tree-abode mean for the Sudani. Adopting an emic approach, the snake and the tree will be seen as traditional Sudanese earth symbols, which are considered able to offer protection, heal the historical stigma of slavery, help the subaltern establish their “roots” in the Sudanese ground, and thus upgrade the low social status of the Sudani. In this way, they will be transformed into free men and genuine landowners.

Artikel ini membahas interpretasi simbolis posisi struktural ular dan pohon dalam peribadahan local terhadap roh zar pada perbatasan Sudan Islam. Melalui penelitian bibliografi, artikel ini bertujuan untuk mempelajari bagaimana ular Azrag Banda, manifestasi dari zar, dan pohon tempat tinggalnya dianggap sebagai simbol penting dalam zar tumbura Sudan, yaitu praktik keislaman yang

dibangun oleh orang lokal dan kultus penyembahan roh dengan fungsi terapeutik. Ular Azrag Banda dan pohonnya mempunyai peran khusus dan simbol yang berarti dalam peribadatan orang Sudan, karena adanya pengalaman sejarah kolektif mereka selaku penyembah zar tumbura. Seperti dijelaskan dalam artikel, masyarakat asli Sudan pada masa lalu mengalami perbudakan dan pengusiran, dan saat ini mereka hidup di pinggiran Sudan. Berdasarkan hal tersebut, artikel ini menjelaskan arti entitas ular Azrag Banda dan pohon tempat tinggalnya bagi orang Sudan. Dengan mengadopsi pendekatan emic, ular dan pohon akan dilihat sebagai simbol bumi tradisional Sudan, yang dianggap mampu memberikan perlindungan, menghilangkan stigma sejarah perbudakan, membantu membangun “akar” mereka di tanah Sudan, dan dengan demikian meningkatkan status sosial masyarakat Sudan yang dianggap rendah. Dengan demikian, mereka akan menjadi orang merdeka dan pemilik wilayah yang sebenarnya.

**Keywords:** *Snake, Tree, Sudan, Zar, Transformation.*

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**Introduction**

Worship always takes place in time and space. The act of worship never happens in a vacuum. The interaction between the worshipper and the object of worship is a process of spiritual immaterial nature and activity with material dimensions. As Kerestetzi (2018) suggests, we should not stop at the question “What do you believe in?”; on the contrary, we should go further and ask “Where do you believe?”. That’s because space is both physical and mental (Gintsburg, 2018 : 216). For those who worship in a specific place, what that place physically and mentally symbolizes are two different spheres of existence which find their unity in the function of space as a bridge between the world of men and the spiritual world.

In our case-study of the Sudanese zar cult (with special focus on zar *tumbura*), the function above is carried out by certain sacred trees which are

inhabited by Azrag Banda, a spiritual entity who manifests itself as a snake. In this context, the interplay between space, materiality and the Sudanese spirit-possession therapeutic practice of *zar tumbura* will be demonstrated in relation to the social background of its followers, the Sudani, people of low social status and descendants of slaves. Our entire research hypothesis can be summed up in Spivak's (2010) question: "Can the subaltern speak?" We will exhibit how a positive answer can be given in the case of Sudani for whom the snake Azrag Banda and his sacred tree-abode are powerful healing symbols of social stigma and means of uttering social speech in the process of resistance against their marginalization by the system.

As the title indicates, the focus of the work at hand lies in the significance of the snake and the tree. These will be considered in two aspects. The first aspect is their benevolence in the pre-Islamic Sudanese healing and ancestorworship cults. The second aspect is their benevolence in the framework of *zar* worship, in which the snake Azrag Banda possesses the healing and protective properties of an ancestor without himself being regarded as an ancestor. A connection between the two aspects above will be outlined through the exposition of the historical experience of slavery in the Sudanese society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The early devotees of *zar tumbura*, being themselves descendants of slaves, saw in the face of Azrag Banda and his dwelling place a protector and a firm ground for their community respectively. Having said this, we will attempt to demonstrate how fundamental attributes of the snake and the tree have been transferred from the pre-Islamic Sudanese religious tradition to the Sudanese worship of the *zar* spirit in regard to the snake Azrag Banda and his sacred tree. To do so, we will perceive the snake and the tree as symbols, that is, as vehicles of meaningful content which point to something beyond their own nature. In this way, one can suggest that the snake and the tree are not healers; their supernatural healing qualities lie in the cultural hermeneutical lenses, which

want the animal/plant itself and its therapeutic-protective function to be two sides of the same coin. This will be demonstrated throughout the following pages.

At the moment one can ask about the reason why the Sudani have included the snake and the tree in the worship of zar. How did the snake and the tree have such strong connotations for the corpus of the devotees of zar *tumbura*? The answer which we give is that the mingling of Sudanese cultural elements with a sequel of historical events has ended up in a creative process of religious synthesis, which has found fruitful ground in the zar cult. From this perspective, we will describe the historical context of the 19th century in the first chapter. The period in question is of decisive significance for the Sudani since it encloses the experience of slavery and social polarization which the cult has retained in its collective memory. In the same chapter, the ways and the procedures through which the Sudani define themselves will be studied as well. As will be shown below, the formation of the Sudani collective identity and, subsequently, the Sudani Self is strongly related to the opposition that the zar followers have encountered due to the Arab Northerners.

Secondly, we will examine some possible origins of the cult along with its purpose of existence. Thus, the cult and the spirit's connection to the people's background, are about to be described. In particular, the social stigma people carry will be regarded as a trauma that needs to be healed by the spirit. In other words, the cult will be viewed as a means of social transformation for its marginalized devotees. Thirdly, we will deal with the spiritual entity Azrag Banda. Azrag Banda is a modality of zar which has the form of either a snake inhabiting a sacred tree or a black slave from the South.

In the fourth chapter, fragments of the pre-Islamic Sudanese religious traditions of various ethnic groups will be disclosed, in which the snake and the tree play the role of relatives and healers. This will be done to map how these notions have passed from the Sudanese tradition to the Islamic spirit-

possession cult of zar *tumbura* through the zar worshipers who come mainly from ethnic groups of the South. Finally, the meaning of the symbols of the snake and the tree will be discussed with regard to their chthonic nature and the subsequent stability that follows their material expression in the cult.

### **A history of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Sudan and the formation of the Sudani Self**

Staging the religious atmosphere of the zar cults, one ought primarily to understand the historical identities and anticipations reflected in the ritual gatherings. In order to do so, the slavery of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has to be taken into consideration as a foundation of the Sudani Self. This is a crucial period in the history of *tumbura* throughout which the worship of the spirit zar gradually became established in a surrounding consisting of Islamic and traditional local religious practices.

In the duration of the last 150 years a variety of events has taken place with a decisive role for the collective memory of the people of Sudan. In particular, the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have greatly shaped contemporary Sudan's present conditions to a great extent (Spaulding, 2006 : 393). Slavery is the basic element behind the shaping in question and can be divided into two historical periods. According to Jok (2001 : 12), the first period is from the Turco-Egyptian invasion and dominion (*Turkiyya*) of Muhammad Ali until the revolution of Ahmad al-Mahdi (1821-1881) and the second from the establishment of Mahdi's regime (*Mahdiyya*) until its overthrow by the Anglo-Egyptian military forces (1881-1898). The aforementioned periods of time should be viewed according to the impact they had on Sudan regarding slavery and, specifically, the way through which slavehood was received as social stigma.

To begin with, it is of paramount importance to keep in mind that slavery existed in Sudan from before. The slaves were used for domestic and other services, as Stevenson (1966 : 30) notes. They also held significant offices in the

army and the bureaucracy of the pre-colonial Sudan (Spaulding, 1982 : 8). They were associated with activities related to agriculture and livestock farming; nevertheless, both the Turkiyya regime of 1821 and the following overthrowing Mahdiyya led to a significant decrease in the status of the slaves (Makris, 2000 : 25).

During the Turco-Egyptian dominion destructive raids in Southern Sudan were carried out by the Arab Northerners with the aim of enslaving the locals, while in the following period of Mahdiyya slavery continued developing as a main part of the economy (Jok, 2001 : 75). The purpose of Sudan's conquest in 1821 by Muhammad Ali was the acquisition of gold and ivory as well as the creation of an army of slaves (Mire, 1985 : 105; Robinson, 2004 : 172). Consequently, a considerable number of raids took place having as victims the people of the south, namely, the ethnic groups of Nuba, Shilluk and Dinka (Bredlid, 2010 : 92). These were of course displaced by being seized away from their own lands, in order to serve their new masters.

However, from the decade of 1850 and on, slave trade was illegalized inside the borders of the Ottoman Empire (Kenyon, 2012 : 31). The measure in question affected negatively mainly the sudanese-arabic groups of the Danaqla and the Jaaliyyin (Johnson, 2003 : 5). In general, the governmental activities related to the abolition of slavery led to rebellions in 1881 under the guidance of Mahdi, who envisioned a more islamic and theocratic regime, while trying at the same time to incorporate slavery in it (Searcy, 2010 : 76). Slavery was indeed embodied and it had particularly the formation of slave-troops called *jihadiyya* (Kapteijns, 1983 : 610; 1984 : 108; Makris, 2000 : 26; Sikainga, 1996 : 32). Finally, Mahdiyya was overthrown by the anglo-egyptian forces in 1898 resulting in the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of Sudan (Johnson, 2003 : 9).

In the reoccupation of Sudan by the Anglo-Egyptians the role of the so-called Sudanese Battalions was central. The soldiers of the Sudanese Battalions came from ethnic groups, such as Dinka, Shilluk, Nuba, Banda, Niam-Niam

(Azande), Nuer and Burun (Lamothe, 2011 : 31). These were all groups of people who have suffered due to slave trade and kept on carrying the stigma of slavery before the eyes of the Arab Northerners even after the reoccupation of Sudan by the Anglo-Egyptians (Makris, 2000 : 41). That is why the terms “Sudani” or “Blacks”, which were used for the soldiers of the Sudanese Battalions, were also words synonymous with servanthood (Makris, 2000 : 33).

Everything described above is the main reason for the gap between the Arab Northerners and the Sudani. On the one hand, the Arab Northerners were the outcome of mixing Arab and African elements (Churchill, 1902 : 8). They just decided that they themselves are more Arabs than Africans, as Jok (2001 : 74) underlines. On the other hand, the Sudani were considered as black pagans from the South as well as ‘speaking animals’ by the Arab Northerners (Makris, 2000 : 28). Therefore, they had to go through procedures of Islamization and Arabicization in order to improve their social status (Churchill, 1902 : 8-9; El-Tom, 1998 : 156; Makris, 1994 : 116). Without giving up on the traditional religious practices of their cultural context, the Islamized slaves recognized Islam as an additional source of blessing (Levtzion, 1985 : 189). Nevertheless, the Arab Northerners never saw the South Sudanese as equals.

The result was the polarization of the society of Sudan: one the one side, the so-called Arabs of the North and, on the other, the black Africans of the South (Jok, 2001 : 74); these were actually imagined communities (Anderson, 2006). The borders of these two communities help the former define the latter and vice versa, since the borders can indicate a meeting point, a space of contact and a means of interaction (Barth, 1969 : 15). Each community is represented by a social identity and the quality of the relationship between the two identities is transfused into symbols.

This means that symbols include elements of the human experience generated in specific social contexts and historical surroundings. On the basis of this observation the meaning-giving experience becomes memory enclosed

in meaningful symbols, which ‘are involved in social processes’ (Turner, 1982 : 21). Therefore, the snake and the tree have to be understood as living entities, including events from the Sudani collective memory and fragments of the Sudani Self compared to the Arab Other.

### **The zar spirit**

The meaning of “zar” is unclear (Hurgronje, 1889 : 124). Littmann (1950 : 46) supports the Cushitic origin of zar from “jar”, the name of the ancient Cushitic god of the sky (Natvig, 1987 : 677). The zar cult can be found in countries including Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Sudan (Fakhouri, 1968 : 49). It was probably spread through female slaves from Ethiopia to Egypt, probably in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century (Klunzinger, 1878 : 388). According to Seligman (1914 : 322), its origins can be traced in both Ethiopia and Sudan. According to Makris (2000 : 23), the term “zar” is used to denote three things: the spirit itself, the disorders it causes and the organized rituals to appease the spirit.

In Sudan, where Islam is the dominant religion, one can find different zar cult groups, zar *tumbura* and zar *burei* being among them. Taking into consideration the identities of the privileged Arab Northerner and the marginalized Sudani, Reese (2018 : 115) states that zar *burei* is identified with the former and zar *tumbura* with the latter. It is also said that the first is male, while the other is female (Zenkovsky, 1950 : 73). Through these identifications, a dichotomy of the type Self/Other becomes as clear as the symbolic order which segregates the two.

Both zar cults can be better understood not separately, but placed together in an arena of social negotiations. The target of these negotiations from the side of zar *tumbura* is to prove that the Sudani are the genuine owners of the land of Sudan, according to Makris (Makris, 2019 : 85), while zar *burei* is different, as one could observe. The ceremonies, the symbols and the spiritual



manifestations of zar *tumbura* are reflections of the Sudani experience of slavery and an attempt for reinterpretation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's history. 'The pain and suffering' of the Sudani historical experience, due to the social discrimination that the members of zar *tumbura* have been through, 'are obliterated in its subsequent re-evaluation as a uniquely efficacious sign of divine favour', according to Lewis (2003 : 63). Thus, the stigma of slavery and illness is transformed into a source of blessing and strength by the spirit, which gets appeased, but without leaving its host (Kenyon, 1995 : 112).

Generally, the purpose of the zar worship teams is apparently to cure the illness of the possessed person and placate the spirit through the ritual offering of gifts (Kapteijns & Spaulding, 1994 : 9). As a healing cult, the Sudanese zar is connected to the traumatic events and experiences of slavery and displacement that the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought to the lives of the people (Kenyon, 2019 : 39). From that perspective, it is of no coincidence that people who belong to 'subordinate social categories (...) appear increasingly to be absorbed into such cults' (Lewis, 1966 : 322).

The ritual reminds us of what anthropologists call "rites of passage". As Arnold van Gennep (1960 : 21) describes, the rites of passage are divided in three stages: preliminal (separation), liminal (threshold) and postliminal (incorporation). The result is the change of status, a transition "from one place in society to another" (Gennep, 1960 : 13; Turner, 1980 : 160). Respectively, the one about to be initiated in the *tumbura* cult is first isolated and treated with traditional medicines and incense; after that a "thanksgiving ceremony" follows as the second stage and, finally, comes the initiation ceremony which is accompanied by the sacrifice of an animal (Makris, 2000 : 53). In the end a basic change in the existential condition of the novice takes place, in the sense that the initiated person "has become another" (Eliade, 1975).

The devotees of zar are supposed to get healed from the stigma of social exclusion through their initiation into the cult. Thus, the ritual has the function

of a redressive means (Turner, 1979 : 83); an effort to reconstruct the Sudani Self and fix the crisis caused by the historical experience of enslavement. During the possession, the spirit manifests itself through the possessed person by acting in stereotypical ways that remind of the slavey 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, important persons and events of the Sudani historical experience are revived in the spirit's songs, a kind of historical archive for the devotees (Makris, 1994 : 118).

However, the transformation of the novice from an enslaved to a healed and socially emancipated human being is carried out through the grace (*baraka*) of the Sufi saint Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (Makris, 2019 : 89). Abd al-Qadir is the first who brought “the word of Islam to this part of the world from the Middle East” (Kenyon, 1995 : 111). He founded Qadiriyya, a Sufi brotherhood friendly to non-Arab subalterns (Kenyon, 2019 : 23; Makris, 2019 : 91). The Sudani and the *tumbura* are related to the Sufi saint, because the Sudani are Muslims (Makris, 1996 : 166). Interestingly enough, the relation between the *zar tumbura* and the Qadiriyya brotherhood is characterized by many similarities. One of them is the protection that the spirit offers to its devotees, a relationship found between the Sufi saints and their followers, when the former provide the latter with blessing (Makris, 1994 : 114).

There is also a ceremonial animal sacrifice which takes place as an act of honouring the spirit of the Sufi saint Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, whose boundaries with the *zar* spirit are sometimes blurred (Makris, 1994 : 115; 1996 : 169). Another common element is the Islamic annual calendar with celebrations significant for both the *zar* cult and the Sufi brotherhoods, while present are also some important aspects regarding the structure of the groups and the succession of the leaders (Kenyon, 2019 : 25). Other resemblances are related to the purification of objects through the use of incense, the recitation of quranic passages and the state of trance, which is identified with the practice of *dhikr* (Makris, 1996 : 169).

### **The snake Azrag Banda and its tree-abode**

The redemption and the healing of the *zar tumbura* followers is based on their ceremonial possession by the spirit's manifestations or modalities (*kebyut* in Arabic), each of them having a stereotypical character, according to the historical events they represent (Makris, 1994 : 120). One of these manifestations is called Azrag Banda, which literally means "Black Banda" (Kenyon, 2012 : 183). Banda is one of the names of the South Sudanese ethnic groups, which we mentioned above; the ethnic group in question has suffered from the slave trade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to such an extent that its name ended up being synonymous with slavery (Makris, 1994 : 120; 1996 : 171).

Azrag Banda is frequently represented as a gigantic wild black cannibal from the South wearing a Sudanese tribal skirt of grass and holding a long spear in his hand (Makris, 2015 : 281). He also has the form of a tree-dwelling snake (Makris, 2015 : 324). In Sudan there are two trees in which the spirit is said to inhabit, as it is believed. Kenyon (2012 : 183) informs us of the one out of two snake's dwelling places. In Sennar inside the courtyard of the house, where the cultic gatherings of the *zar burei* group take place, there are two trees, a heglig tree and a nim tree. The snake Azrag Banda is buried under those trees.

Both the nim tree and the heglig tree have significant therapeutic value for the Sudanese people, since parts of them can be used to 'provide a range of cures' (Kenyon, 2012 : 183). The spirit of the black slave Azrag Banda is also associated with healing and is known as a supernatural 'fixer', ready to offer help and protection through serving those who need him (Kenyon, 2012 : 139). At this point, one can ask: why are the snake and the tree so familiar to the people of *zar*? In Sudan the concept of healing is strongly connected to the position that snakes and trees hold in the traditional religious life of the Sudanese. Terms and notions taken from the pre-Islamic traditional Sudanese religion prove that the snake and the tree are positive symbols by linking them to kinship systems and healing concepts. In other words, in the Sudanese

context this forms an ambience of proximity between the spirit and its devotees and defines the conditions under which zar becomes a source of protection.

In the case of zar *tumbura*, Azrag Banda is found living in an acacia tree in Khartoum, as Makris (2015 : 324) describes. Milk and honey are brought to the sacred tree and offered to the snake (Makris, 2015 : 371). On the base of the tree there is a hole which is used as a door by the snake Azrag Banda to enter and come out of its abode (Makris, 2015 : 397). It is believed that the tree in question was found miraculously. In specific, Azrag Banda revealed himself in a dream to Mursal Joghan, the Banda who brought zar *tumbura* from the South to Khartoum (Makris, 2015 : 370). Through the dream Mursal found the tree, which was still small, took care of it and the people started venerating it (Makris, 2015 : 370).<sup>1</sup> According to the field research of Makris' (2015 : 370), the description of Hajja Tayiba, the woman who is in charge for the tree, goes thus:

“The first one who brought the *tumbura* to Burri was Mursal Joghan. He was from the South. He himself was a Zande. He was a Banda. (...) The tree was a hierophany. Someone was buried under the tree. Azrag Banda manifested himself here. (...) He was from the land of the Azande a Banda. He had no family. When he revealed himself here. Mursal went to him. There was a forest here. The tree was small and Joghan was taking care of it. He used to clean it and offer *karamat* and *balila*. He appeared in Joghan's dream (*halamo*). (...) If one were ill, he [Mursal] would cure him with the *tumbura*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here we will just note that the contribution of dreams in the structuring of the daily life is remarkable, if one thinks that dreams are considered lenses through which people come in contact with hidden or invisible aspects of the world, as el-Aswad (2010 : 450) observes. Zar is invisible like the wind, as Kenyon (2012 : 77) denotes, while another possible etymology of the spirit's name is the word *zahara*, which indicates that the spirits reveal themselves through dreams (Al-Shahi, 1984 : 30).

<sup>2</sup> My translation.

In another description, Hajja Tayiba is presented saying that Azrag Banda is buried under the tree (Makris, 2015 : 377). Therefore, we observe that we are confronted with two different cases of *zar*, which have one significant thing in common: the *zar tumbura* and the *zar burei* want the snake Azrag Banda to be connected to a sacred tree. The spirit itself as well as the tree have protective and therapeutic functions. Gilsenan (1982 : 115) refers to this kind of blessing and grace when he speaks of trees as ‘poles of attraction’, which ‘serve as immediate and concrete foci and sources of access to blessing.’ It is of no coincidence that the same author connects this type of *baraka* to ‘the poor of the urban margins’, since for them ‘it fits so completely the disruption and discontinuities of existence’ (Gilsenan, 1982 : 114). Hence the snake and the tree become symbols of healing and protection of the marginalized ones, while they also remain united under the shade of the supernatural.

### **Snakes and trees as ancestors and healers**

To begin with, some lineages among the ethnic group of Nuer venerate the python (*nyal*), because it is said that the reptile is the brother of their ancestor (Evans-Pritchard, 1956a : 67). However, the veneration of snakes among the Nuer transcends the boundaries of totemism. Nuer behave to snakes as if the latter were human beings; they make offerings and take care of them (Evans-Pritchard, 1956a : 68; Jackson, 1923 : 168). Therefore, Howell (1953 : 86) reasonably writes that every Nuer reveres snakes.

The ethnic group of Dinka has also a similar behavior towards snakes. Food, milk and hospitality are offered to certain types of snakes, such as the python and the combra (Bedri, 1948 : 45; Hambly, 1929 : 659; 1931 : 50; Jackson, 1923 : 175; Lienhardt, 1951 : 308; Schweinfurth, 1874 : 158). The snakes visit the huts ‘of those who have snake divinities’, as Lienhardt (1961 : 121) observes.

As in the case of Nuer and Dinka, so in the case of Azande one can frequently find the snake as a totem (Evans-Pritchard, 1956b : 108; 1961 : 118). The deceased person, whose totem is the snake, after his death returns to the world in the form of his or her totem animal (Brock, 1918 : 253). That's why snakes are believed to embody the souls of dead ancestors. The veneration of snakes as ancestors can also be found among the groups of the Homr, the Nuba, the Dubab, the Fur and the Bari (Davies, 1919 : 232; Bolton, 1936 : 97; Kauczor, 1923 : 3; Cooke & Beaton, 1939 : 198-201; Seligman & Seligman, 1928 : 455; 1932 : 274-275).

A class of spirits in which the Nuer believe is the spirits of the earth, known as *kuth piny* or *kolangni* (Evans-Pritchard, 1956a : 1). The *kolangni* are frequently considered capable of curing certain types of illness (Evans-Pritchard, 1956a : 100; Howell 1953 : 86). A few lines later, Howell adds that one of the main *kolangni* spirits is called *Biel*, which is often identified as a snake. According to the same author, one of the four types of *Biel* is known as *Biel riv*, that is, the '*Biel* of the cobra', which is also referred to as *Biel jiath*, that is, the '*Biel* of the trees.' Therefore, it is obvious that among the Nuer there is an immediate relationship between snakes and healing, but also trees.

In the ethnic group of the Azande one can find the community of Mani. According to Rojek (2000 : 5), the Mani 'act as conduits for new types of medicine and magic imported from foreign people.' The Mani community is also related to cultic gatherings, which have a snake as their object of worship (Evans-Pritchard, 1931 : 133). The snake is conceived as the protector of the members of the Mani community (Evans-Pritchard, 1931 : 135; Larken, 1926 : 53-54).

The tree can also play the role of the ancestor, just like the snake. For instance, the Nuer, according to Evans-Pritchard (1956a : 6), traditionally believe they come from a tamarind tree (*Lic*), described as their mother and to which sacrifices and offerings were made. Moreover, it is said that when they

were born, they either came out from a hole between the roots of the tree or fell from its branches. In addition, the Bari believe that the *mulakatio*, the spirits of the deceased, inhabit trees that grow near graves. This is why these trees are considered sacred by and protectors of the deceased person's family (Seligman & Seligman, 1928 : 456-457). In times of misfortune, the living relatives can go and make offerings and sacrifices to the trees of their ancestors (Seligman & Seligman, 1928 : 458). Consequently, 'every grave is a potential shrine' (Seligman, 1931 : 20). This is also the case with the Anuak and the Dinka, among which certain trees represent their ancestors (Bacon, 1922 : 119; Lienhardt, 1961 : 121; Seligman & Seligman, 1932 : 109-110).

The Dinka believe in the existence of the spirit Garang (Lienhardt, 1961 : 84). The spirit in question is represented as a snake and a heglig tree (Lienhardt, 1961 : 85). The people associated with the Garang have the gift of healing (1961 : 85). Again the connection of the snake, the tree and the healing process is visible in the case of this spirit. The Anuak respect certain trees with supernatural powers, as Bacon (1922 : 126) writes. The same author goes on to claim that these sacred trees are used as a cure for a curse called *atshini*, which causes illness or even death. Apart from the case of *atshini*, trees are also used in other circumstances, such as snake bite. In this case, the bark of the heglig tree is used as a treatment; after the healer dips the bark in water, he rubs it on the injured spot (Bacon, 1922 : 127). The association of healing with the heglig tree is also observed among the Berti (Holy 1991 : 78-79). A similar case is found among the Acholi, who offer gifts to the 'tree of God', the *okango*, and pray to it for health (Seligman & Seligman, 1932 : 126).

### **The Lévi-Straussian question (Pt.1): why the snake?**

A huge "why" lies behind the thinking of Lévi-Strauss (2001 : 8) regarding the symbolisms one can find in traditional cultural narratives, in order to decodify them. It is, therefore, time to ask the Lévi-Straussian question: Why? After what

is mentioned above, it is clear that there is a strong connection between the snakes, the trees and the human beings in the traditional Sudanese culture. Why Azrag Banda is important to the Sudani and what he means to them is already clear. But why would ever anyone choose the snake either as a relative or as a source of healing? For instance, why would an ethnic group, like that of Nuer, consider the subcategory of *nyarecjok* as a genealogy of snakes (Evans-Pritchard, 1956a : 89)? And why would the same ethnic group represent the spirit *deng*, the protector of humankind, as a python that coils itself around its children to protect them (Evans-Pritchard, 1956a : 47)? In short, how can the snake be identified with ancestors or healers of people?

In both cases the connection of human and snake is apparent. The answer lies in what Tambiah (1985 : 60) calls ‘analogical mode of thought’, that is, transferring certain qualities ‘to a recipient object or person on an analogical basis.’ Since this procedure equips the object of worship with an additional meaning to give birth to its symbolic side, it divides its significance into two levels: the literal and the symbolic. However, a single motion exists for the person who participates in the symbolic aspect, a movement ‘which transfers us from the one to the other level and absorbs us into a second significance due to -or through- its literal synonym’ (Ricoeur, 2002 : 61).

We confirmed the role of the snake as relative and as a symbol of healing, but what is the common element that the symbol in question shares with man? Which is the connection between the two? Many times the spirits of the dead take the form of a snake. The truth is that the snake as reptile is identified with the earth and this makes it suitable as a chthonic deity; at the same time, the snake is considered as a child of the earth, its oldest inhabitant and its guardian (Hayes, 1918 : 278; Nalder, 1926 : 86). This concept goes up to the point of identification between the snake and the roots of a tree, due to their similar shape (Cirlot, 1990 : 350; Corkill, 1935 : 250). Therefore, there is an important association of the snake with the chthonic world.



The proximity between the snake and the earth connects the former to the dead, since the deceased person enters into the earth after he or she passes away. What makes a native person one with his own land is the return to it. With death a series of manifestations related to the deceased starts anew. These can be manifestations related either to him, who belongs to a snake-worshipping clan, or to the earth, like the snake resembling the trees' roots. If death and burial are sufficient reasons due to which the spirit of the ancestor is identified with the snake, then the snake itself begins being viewed as an ancestor. And if the ancestor is a native person, who is a genuine owner of the land, then his descendants will be considered as such too. Since a kinship bond exists between man and snake-ancestor, the former will protect the latter and vice versa. Consequently, the snake becomes an object of the veneration of the ancestors and acquires not only the feature of the ancestor but also of the protector from which comes that of the healer, as we conjecture.

### **The lévi-straussian question (Pt.2): why the tree?**

A tree can be potentially regarded as a dwelling place of spirits. If it is believed that spirits frequent at a certain place, then the area in question may be seen as the Center of the world, an *Axis Mundi*, which is definitely a sacred place - probably the most sacred of all (Eliade, 1961 : 39). Thus, if the abode of spirits is a tree, then there is no doubt regarding the existence and the location of the Center. Such a Center is revealed through a hierophany, a manifestation of the holy, and gives strength to the world (Eliade, 1959 : 21).

Applying the observations above to the case of Azrag Banda's tree, we realize that his place of residence is a holy place. His manifestation, for instance, to Mursal Joghhan in a dream is indeed a hierophany; *zar tumbura*, as a subaltern practice, takes root in the land which the Sudani claim as their own. The result is that the tree starts being an important part of the Sudani Self. The rituals surrounding the tree disclose the connection between procedure and matter

(Lévi-Strauss, 1966 : 217). This relationship is concerned with a kind of substitution, according to which it is held that the symbolic power of trees derives from their quality as suitable substitutes for people; the capacity for substitution lies in both their dissimilarity and similarity with man regarding the element of life, something which happens between animals and man as well (Bloch, 2001 : 40).

It is true that man develops physically like the tree to a certain degree, but death is the event which convinces him regarding the power of the tree (Leeuw, 1986 : 56). In that sense, the tree is differentiated from man through an element that both share: through the element of life. Nevertheless, it seems that the sacred abode-tree represents the collective Self for the Sudani. Through the roots of the tree they claim their own “roots” in the land which they conceive as theirs. In other words, the tree is a symbol which stands for the community.

The tree is a ritual arena inside of which the Sudani define their identity (Fernandez, 2003 : 189). The definition of the identity is an act enclosed in space and the latter cannot exist independent of such events (Tilley, 1994 : 10). Afterall, a collective feeling, in accordance with the Sudani identity, consciously realizes its own self in relation to some material object (Durkheim, 1976 : 236). In conclusion, the tree of Azrag Banda is not a mere place but a holy place with self-referential functions regarding the Sudani identity of the followers of *zar tumbura* (Morphy, 1995 : 201).

The general significance of the tree as manifestation of the ancestral spirit and as a symbol of healing allows us to make the same assumption that we did for the snake before: if the tree is the representation of the spirit of a deceased indigenous ancestor, then the descendant is also indigenous as well as protected by the ancestral spirit which can relieve him from hard times in life. In consequence, the tree is a polyphonic symbol which can be employed by man, in order to use those features with which he himself feels to identify.

## Conclusion

The snake and the tree have been considerable symbols for a variety of ethnic groups of Sudan. As shown above, their association with the earth makes them even more suitable for the stability that the people of the zar cult search for in their lives. At the same time, the Sudanese tradition wants the snake and the tree to be symbols associated with the protective intervention of the ancestors and the mysteries of miraculous healing. In the same way, the roots of the tree also stand for permanent connection to the ground. The devotees of zar tumbura have in common the need for stability in a rapidly changing world (Kenyon, 1995 : 116). Thus they need to realize themselves concerning material objects, which not just represent but also offer firmness.

Even though it is believed that the zar spirit is rootless like the wind (Al-Shahi, 1984 : 30), the leaders of the worship group ‘found a way to root Azrag, literally, to their house of zar’ (Kenyon, 2012 : 185). As the abode of the spirit, the tree is a significant point of reference for the members of the cult and a stable source of power for the community itself. In that sense, the followers of zar are given the opportunity to create their own “roots” in the ground of a cult, which is defined by the past experience of slavery and the present experience of marginalization. Originating from a tribe with a name connected to slavery, the spirit of the black cannibal Azrag Banda represents someone who can really understand the insecurity and the injustice through which the followers of the cult have been going. Hence the tree becomes their house and the snake their guardian.

The Sudani are people who come from ethnic groups the names of which are synonyms to slavery, as we have already seen. The slavery of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has especially influenced the atmosphere of the Sudanese society through widening the gap between the powerful and the weak, the Arab Northerners and the Sudani, Muslims and “pagans”. The latter, being marginalized and weakened, have desired bridging the social gap through *tumbura*.

In the Sudanese arena of battle between Islam and Animism, as Trimingham (1965 : 242) names it, cults like zar *tumbura* exist as a form of resistance to the hegemonic practices (Shaw & Stewart, 1994 : 18). As Bell (2009 : 215) indicates, the efficiency of the ritualization lies mainly in resistance. Specifically, the veneration of zar is a form of psychotherapy that aims to transform the socially unacceptable to acceptable (Kennedy, 1967 : 190). The zar cult's function in question equips the human being with ways that help him deal with reality (Kiev, 1972 : 34). We can, therefore, say that the target of zar *tumbura* is healing through the abrogation of social contradictions. Subsequently, through such forms of religiosity, an alternative form of resistance is established (Ortner, 1995 : 181).

In closing, one has to keep in mind that for the devotees of zar, this tree is not a simple tree (Harvey, 2005 : 37; Meyer, 2015 : 346; Settler, 2018 : 46); it is rather the answer to their hopes and concerns. Being a bond between the visible world of human beings and the invisible world of spiritual entities, the tree is a gate to the realm of the divine, which is guarded by Azrag Banda (Kenyon, 2012 : 184). The followers of zar can feel safe enough under the gaze of the snake Azrag Banda and in the shade of his sacred abode tree. Consequently, it can be said that the materialization of the spiritual realm of zar contributes to the symbolic articulation and amplification of the social voice of the Sudani, in a way that through zar *tumbura* the Sudani Self can be healed as well as heard from the margins of the Sudanese society and its respective discourse.

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