

## Azande King's Relationship with his Children

*By: Rev. Jackson Bullen*

### Introduction

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Like any other society, the Azande society is so complex that to understand even the most seemingly mundane concept such as the relationship between a father and his children must be put in its cultural and historical contexts lest we awkwardly miss the point of its meaning or its symbolism, especially when the father happens to be the reigning Azande king. To begin with, an Azande King comes from a long line of extraordinary members of a clan whose members always claim chieftaincy in the Azande communities wherever and whenever these communities exist. These individuals did not just become kings or chiefs by inheritance alone, but also chiefly through initial power struggles between them and members of other clans. Ngara, who was known to have subjugated the Azande people to his rule by the sheer might of his physical strength, displayed arrogant overconfidence in his physical strength so much so that he continuously taunted the Azande men, warning them that any of them who wished to free himself from his authority would have to defeat Ngara in a fight. Inevitably, one of the clans rose to the challenge and it thoroughly vanquished Ngara. Jubilant, the people gave the victorious clan the name Avongara because they defeated Ngara who was until that time the strongest and most powerful man in the land. Avongara was also later given the title of Gbia or chief (Tartizio, 2020). With the title came "hard work, organizing the youth, establishing a good social organization, building strong base of followers, ensuring good security, and wise leadership. Convinced that the leadership of the Gbia has enabled them to achieve their own security and wellbeing, the Azande people gave the title of Bakindo (King) to the Avongara (Tartizio, 2020). They pledged their allegiance to the king, who in turn, understood that the protection of his territory was paramount for his citizens. This relationship between the king and his people underscores the meaning of the concept of a king in the Azande culture which identifies a king as that person who has acquired his power through a power struggle and who has been

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made a chief by the people and to him alone do all the Azande people pay allegiance and homage. They abide by his rulings on important matters concerning the community. Secondly, a king is also seen as a prince who inherited the powers to reign from his ailing or deceased father. Thirdly, in case of an emergency where there has not been a designated prince to take over the reins of power, the elders would carefully search for a courageous and wise prince among the royal household and select him to serve as king. It is worth noting that succession in the Azande kingship system is not necessarily hierarchical. The first-born prince does not automatically inherit the kingship from his father. The new king could be identified through a thorough scrutiny of all the princes. King Bazingbi, for instance, couldn't care less which one of his very many sons and daughters would become king after him. He set a precedence by choosing his lastborn son, Gbudue, to succeed him as king. Gbudue was known to possess good leadership qualities, including strength of character, wisdom, respect, bravery, hard work, physical strength, and credibility. No wonder the people recognized these leadership qualities earlier when they made him Baira Aparanga (Youth Leader) years before he became king. These qualities increased in strength as Gbudue consolidated his kingship. As king, he was, no doubt, a man with whose mind no one could play. Often whenever he had a strong view on what was needed to be done for his people, he would come up with a better way to accomplish the task. His relationship with his children were, however, typically in locked step with the ironclad protocols of the Avongara kings. After all, he was the king whose omnipresence in and around the royal household was felt by all, especially the princesses, in his presence or absence

### **Naming the New-born Child of an Azande King**

Like life itself, relationships between the father and his children, begins practically at a child's birth. This important event is followed in the Azande tradition by another important event, namely naming the newborn child.

The children of an Azande king are named "according to events in history or present stories and the expected future." (Zizi, 2020). This could be seen in five ways: First, there was always a nickname given by anybody to a child on the very day of its birth. If it is a baby boy, they would call him Badi and a baby girl would be nicknamed Nadi. Such nicknames are not used only in the king's house but would be in circulation among the other Azande people. Some people become known into adulthood by their nicknames. Secondly, The king could give name of an ancestor to a new born in the royal house. Thirdly, the king himself would give his child a name that has a special meaning to the king. For instance, Gbudue means 'I pierced' (an animal). Fourthly, the king could also ask his wife to name a child. This applies usually to a girl child. There are no known specific reasons for this practice, but it is most likely because, traditionally, girls

have not been a priority in the kings' mind. Nonetheless, it is on rare occasions that the king would give one of his many wives this privilege for the fear that the other wives would also demand the same privilege. Lastly, if it happened that an important guest was present in the king's house when a child is born, either the child may be called after the guest as a gesture of honor or the guest may be asked to name the newborn. It is, however, only the king who may make such a request.

Naming a child in the kings' house or among the Azande is the official ritual of 'bringing a child out of the room' where it has stayed for the past three to four days since its birth. The naming could only be done officially before the celebration takes place in the morning after the Mbukuse (umbilical cord) cuts off.

Most kings did not keep the names given at birth. They gave themselves the power names or their subjects encouraged kings to acquire a power names. For example, Woote, the son of Yakpati called himself "Bazingbi" meaning the conqueror. In a similar situation, the names given at birth or as youth to King Gbudwe were Sukangi and Yombio respectively, He took the name Gbudue, whose meaning was provided in the text above, while in power.

### **The King's Relationship with His Children from Early Childhood**

The Azande King's relationship with his children from early childhood begins with the king diligently taking care of all his children. He also makes sure that his wives are training the children to behave well. Meeting the needs of the children is the prerogative of the king because, in all aspects of life, delivering children is something and meeting their needs is quite another thing. The king works hard to ensure that basic needs and other necessary needs of his children are met so as to avoid any misconduct that the children could initiate because they were not well taken care of. Hence, problems are always resolved as fast as they reach the ears of the official who is in charge of such affairs in the king's household. The king's children have always been the most taken care of children in the Azande land. In fact, there are no records of king's children suffering of food shortages before, during or after the colonial times.

As far as traditional education is concerned, the Azande king uses his daily interaction with his young children (seven year-olds) as an opportunity for him to impart knowledge to the impressionable children. He tutors them not only on leadership and social skills development, but also on the all-important topic of cooperation among the children and their mothers, the king's wives. The king also takes advantage of the

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daily morning and afternoon campfires in the royal household to educate the children on a number of topics, including the rigid set of rules that must be adhered to by the children whenever they are in the presence of their father, the king. The children are taught that the king demands respect from each child, not only for himself but also for everybody. When talking to the king, the children must not only kneel but must also not see the eyes of the king in the process. Children must talk politely and use words of respect and logic to the king. They must also respect the wives of the king even if they are not their biological mothers. They must also accord a childless wife of the king the same respect they would show to the king's other wives and the children would refer to her as mother.

In turn, the king would take care of all his children without any discrimination. Thus, he would gather the princes and princesses around the campfires without fail. He treats them also in a manner that is appropriate to their age and level of their personal growth. Nonetheless, he teaches them the principles of equality so that the children see themselves as members of the same family under the king rather than as enemies or persons affiliated to their mothers or uncles. For those children of the king who return to the royal household after having resided, for special reasons, with their maternal uncles who gave them special treatment, they are treated equally with the other children of the king under the royal roof. But they must adapt quickly to the life of obedience and prepare themselves for leadership roles. It is the king's obligation to always keep his children from his many wives united. He advises them on matters pertaining to culture, livelihood and cooperation among them. The Azande king forges further relationships with his children at this stage by honoring them with adoring words that make them feel his affection. He refers to them affectionately as Bakumba, which translates into a 'highly respected person.' No doubt, the little Bakumba feel inspired when the king himself refers to them as highly respected persons. They even feel fully encouraged to become leaders in the future.

The king would frequently assemble his children to make sure that the lessons he has taught them were internalized and demonstrated by the children. Should it happen that the king needed to address his wives on an important, urgent matter at the same campfire where the children usually wait for their daily lessons, he would delegate his brother or his elder son to stand in for him so that the children do not miss their lessons around the campfire (Tartizio, 2020). Moreover, court elders are frequently present in the royal courtyard to interact with the king's children. As a result of this rigorous and constant coaching, the king's children begin to behave differently from the other Azande children. This behavior could be identified through the obvious observation that the king's children do not play or joke with other children randomly. Their interaction with other children from outside the royal household takes place during social events such as community games, dancing, hunting, funerals and public rallies. The king's children also interact with

other children whenever they visit the homes of their uncles (Zizi, 2020). Nonetheless, the king's children could always be identified by the dignity and respect with which they carry themselves in public.

### **The King's Relationships with His Adolescent Children**

As the king's children begin to attain adulthood, they are trained to be loyal and obedient to the king and respectful to the people outside the royal household too. All the children provide social services to the king. The older children are given some practical training in governing. Teaching the children livelihood skills in order to ensure a successful future has always been a critical component of the Azande traditional education. The king would also train children to behave well so that they could portray a good image of the king and his royal household everywhere in the community. Great emphasis is put on bringing up well-disciplined and well-informed children who are able to manage people well and strategically. Consequently, princes and princesses gain influence only through their interaction with the king and the communities at large. They associate closely with people connected to the king and who are able to guide their steps or offer them advice.

In addition to the informal education which the children receive under the tutelage of the king, the Azande kings have also been keen on offering all their children Western-style formal education. No Azande king would leave his children without Western-style education. It is recorded that the student to join the (Wau) school in 1907 was the son of Rikita, a Zande Prince. Twelve out of the eighteen princes who enrolled in the school as boarding students were Azande princes five of whom were the sons of chief Tombura. Therefore, people referred to the school as 'Wau School Princes College.' (Roland 200,P.225).

During the colonial times, the Azande king ensured that his children were educated before the rest of the children. Roland said that he opened a school at the new mission with eight boys, all of them the chiefs' sons (Roland 200,226). Giving children a Western education was seen as the culture of the kings or chiefs.

### **The King's Relationships with His 20-year Old and Older Children**

When the king's children become adults at the age of 20 years or older, the king would distribute powers among his sons. He will also designate the heir to the kingship. It is not uncommon for the king at this stage to appoint some officials from outside the royal family to administer certain zones in the land. Although members of other clans could serve as admin-

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istrators of zones, it is only a member of the kingship or Avongara who can ascend to the Azande throne (Zagba, 2020).

But more importantly, this is the time when another event occurs in the relationship of the king and his children who are now about to enter a crucial stage in their respective lives. It is inevitable that the king's grown up children would wish to marry.

### **The Royal Marriage**

Traditionally, the Azande marriage, especially in the household of the Avongara royalty, is, for all intended purposes, an arranged family affair in which the patriarch holds all the reins. It is an item of the Avongara, and later of the Azande culture as a whole, for the parents to choose brides for their sons. This practice was looked upon favorably as a true and real cultural practice wherever an Azande king or chief exercises authority (Zizi, 2020). Moreover, the king considers choosing the first bride for the princes to be very important.

An Avongara princess is engaged for marriage either by direct marriage consultations conducted by confidants of the king and some notables in the community, or the king may offer his daughter to an honorable man in recognition of his good deeds or for his strong relationship with the king's family (Zizi, 2020). This practice was common only among the Avongara, and was considered as a sign of great respect.

As for an Avongara prince, his path to his first marriage is either through an arranged marriage with a meticulously chosen matured lady from a highly regarded family, or through an interesting process characterized by the appearance at the door step of an eatable vegetable known as seresere. This process is triggered when officials from the royal household, who routinely visit chiefs to ostensibly gauge the level of the people's allegiance and respect for the king, happen to observe the presence of a beautiful girl in a household not related by blood to the royal family. If the officials determine that the young girl would be a suitable first bride for a prince, they would make their intention known immediately by leaving a seresere vegetable on the door post of the girl's family home to announce that the young girl has been betrothed to a prince. The presence of the creeping vegetable on the door post constitutes a final signal for any other prospective lover to stay away from the young girl. The presence of the seresere on the family door puts a decisive end to any potential competition by any other interested party.

Upon having been thoroughly informed by his confidants about the target of the seresere and her family's background, the king would communicate a

marriage offer to the prince and relevant members of the royal household. This is done with the full knowledge that the first marriage is not a choice of the bride or groom. It is the choice of the parents. Nonetheless, the king would apply some persuasion skills to make the whole affair seem as if it were really mutually arrived at.

After the king has made the marriage offer to the prince, the family enters a waiting period, and when signs of maturity are observed on the part of the young girl at long last, elders or the person responsible for such affairs in the king's house would notify the head of the household where the seresere was left. Certain elders would organize and go to the house of the would-be in-laws. They would carry with them to the in-laws gifts, including gita (hoe), food items, drinks, kpukabu, and traditionally forged in spear forms from which many other metallic implements could be produced, known as Kawagia.

The arrival of the elders at the home of the would-be in-laws' marks the first celebration, because after this notification, the in-laws will have to prepare food, drinks of all kinds, especially what the Azande call gbangara (wine) which is made out of maru (Millet), and zongi (alcohol). The celebration would be marked by eating and dancing. The girl's parents would then announce a day for them to escort their daughter to her new home. The occasion of escorting the bride to her new home triggers a big farewell celebration. On this occasion, the mother would provide all the necessary needs of her daughter, including drinks and all types of food such as chicken, to be carried to new house of the prince and his bride. The people would feast on food and drinks before they return to their homes, leaving only the bride's mother behind to spend two months or more in order to coach her daughter on how to manage her home (Tartizio, 2020). The prince and his bride would now begin their new life as a new, independent couple in their new home. The parents and relatives would visit them after some time. The mother of the bride would return later to her daughter's home when the young lady is pregnant. She will assist her daughter through pregnancy and child-birth, and would leave her daughter and the newly-born child after having given her daughter another two-to-three months of informal schooling.

Now that the king has conducted the first marriage for his son, the prince would have to chart his own way should he wish to marry more wives in the future because his father will not choose any of the prince's future wives (Zagba, 2020). As a prince, his path to marry in the future is plain and simple. If he wishes to marry a beautiful girl whom he encounters during his visits, he needs only to pronounce the girl to be his wife. Upon hearing the announcement, the girl's parents

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**Nonetheless, cultures, including the Azande culture that has been in existence for generations, tend to be unsurprisingly resilient even when times are changing. Therefore, some aspects of the Azande cultural practices in general and those of the Avongara tradition in particular, including relationships between the king and his children would stubbornly refuse to die until they eventually die.**

would honor the prince’s command, and the marriage celebrations would proceed according to tradition. This scenario may repeat itself many times in the prince’s life until he acquires several wives.

The King’s Relationships with His Married Sons and Daughters  
 Married princes no longer stayed in the courts’ vicinities. The King begin to settle them in different parts of his territory where they begin to practice authority over the Azande and conquered people. They were governors whose powers were subordinate to those held by the King. The prince was assigned a number of courtiers (Abanyaki), pages and oracle performing masters to accompany the prince as his advisors and assistants. The princes were responsible to the King who is in the highest authority in the kingdom.

As for married daughters, they assumed leadership in their homes. Those given in marriage to non-Avongara or commoner notables (Abanyaki) became the most senior wives in cases where husbands had already other commoner wives. Princesses were mostly married to their cousins or influential heads of clans.

### **Conclusion: Times are Changing**

The relationship between an Azande king and his children is intense. On one hand, the king, as a father, is very much involved in the provision of all the needs of his children at the various stages of their growth and development. He ensures that the children are well-fed and are healthy. On the other hand, and despite the presence on the royal courtyard of officials who coach the children on good behavior and respect for themselves and for the king, the Avongara king is the chief tutor of his children on matters of kingship, leadership, and the strict royal protocol. He adequately takes full advantage of the twice-a-day bonfires to impart traditional education to his children. The king also goes to great length to send his children to school where they would acquire Western type of education. He is also obliged in a typical Avongara tradition, to choose the first wife of each of his grownup sons. This practice was eventually coopted by other Azande clans as a culturally accepted practice.

Today, as the Azande kingdom and culture as a whole come under pressure as a result of the spread of Western type of education and Christianity, some cultural practices are in decline or at the verge of disappearance altogether. Since the late 1980s, many Azande people, especially the ones in the diaspora, have abandoned arranged marriages, arguing that marriage should be God’s choice and not parents’ decision. Any educated person, they argue, should decide on their own without the interference of the parents. Nonetheless, cultures, including the Azande culture that has been in existence for generations, tend to be unsurprisingly resilient



even when times are changing. Therefore, some aspects of the Azande cultural practices in general and those of the Avongara tradition in particular, including relationships between the king and his children would stubbornly refuse to die until they eventually die. It is ominous that the king or chiefs in some parts of the Azande land continue to choose wives for their sons. (Crispos, 2020)

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