Divination, Participation and the Cognitive Continuum

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This discussion develops anthropological theory with respect to divination, clarifying the concepts of *divinatory address* and the *unique case of interpretation*. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's pioneering formulations are considered in the light of the well-known studies on Azande divination by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, and in the relatively recent description by Barbara Tedlock of the 'cognitive continuum' at work in divinatory interpretations. It is suggested that Tedlock's description augments Lévy-Bruhl's analysis and resolves apparent contradictions and inadequacies, rendering it appropriate to the cross-cultural study of divination.

Arguably the starting point for modern divination scholarship resides in the ground-breaking analysis of 'primitive mentality' by the French philosopher, sociologist and anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.[1] This brings us to his discussion of ***participation mystique***, and integral to this formulation is the suggestion that divination may involve a distinctive participatory mental pattern or cognitive faculty. A theoretical approach that suggests that there may be a distinct or non-ordinary pattern to mystical, religious and magical phenomena is self-evidently plausible, but it is fair to say that Lévy-Bruhl stands as one of the few modern theorists to have offered a sustained interpretation along these lines, with the result that any comprehensive discussion of divination is bound to acknowledge the impact of the larger questions he has raised. This significant impact is not only historical, in the contentious debate it stirred in twentieth-century anthropology, and in the wider influence of his ideas on the cultural milieu; it is also of contemporary significance in that the implications of his theory are far from having been worked-through and remain a stimulus to specific questions concerning divination. Lévy-Bruhl's method was nominally sociological but his background lay in philosophy, and this dimension makes some of his arguments especially effective; we see this in his discussion of the non-syllogistic nature of primitive thought, which does not fit the Aristotelian model of logic long adopted as definitive. This philosophical observation provides a framework for the suggestion that divination, in general and across cultures, involves a mode other than our ordinary everyday thinking, and does not proceed according to our accepted notions of common sense.

Lévy-Bruhl distances his approach from cognitive psychology and from philosophy; however, it is in these quite different discourses that his ideas may bear fruit. However cautiously formulated, their implications are wide-ranging and controversial, since they challenge the hegemony of our conventional conception of rationality. Equally provocative is the suggestion that the modern theorist, by the very mode in which conceptual theory is constituted, is incapable of comprehending the thinking of the primitive, which remains 'refractory to analysis' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1975, pp.62,68). Opponents of this view argue that we all think in much the same way, although often defectively; the variety of beliefs and behaviours

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[1] Lévy-Bruhl's most influential works are *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inféreures* (1912, translated as *How Natives Think*, 1926); and *La Mentalité primitive* (1922, translated as *Primitive Mentality*, 1923). His revisions, the fruit of a lifetime of reflection, are recorded in a series of late notebooks, posthumously published as *Carnets* (1949), and translated as *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality* (1975). The scope and vitality of his thought is best approached from the notebooks, which can be used to monitor and revise his earlier conclusions. This is the approach I have adopted.

in primitive cultures is quite understandable by us once we examine their premises; these can be explained by social-cultural formations, power and status relationships, by misperceptions, logical errors, emotional confusions, and limited or erroneous factual information. However, even some critics who consider that Lévy-Bruhl exaggerates the dominance of the 'mystical' in primitive culture acknowledge that he has observed a fundamental and problematic difference in modes of thought (Evans-Pritchard, 1981, p.131). This debate is unresolved, but Lévy-Bruhl's basic thesis has become widely accepted, especially in studies of altered states of consciousness (Willis and Curry, 2004, pp.142-4).

Despite a wide dissemination of his ideas, within anthropology itself Lévy-Bruhl's approach was strongly contended from the time of its promulgation (Littleton, S., 1985, Introduction. In: Lévy-Bruhl, 1985, xvi).[2] His gentlemanly armchair theorising appeared old-fashioned in the light of the increasing insistence on hands-on fieldwork conducted by professionals. It seemed over-focused on the 'mystical' and limited in explanatory power compared with more comprehensive ethnological theories, particularly those of Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists. Further, the original description of primitive mentality attracted serious criticisms. Principal amongst these is the definition of the 'primitive', limiting the scope of our observations to aboriginal and native tribal cultures, as if the pattern of thought he describes has nothing to do with us. This goes together with his description of the primitive mode as *pre-logical*, attracting an unwarranted if understandable charge of ethnocentrism, as if primitives somehow cannot think, whereas we can. There is a corollary to ethnocentrism, falling under the spell of modern positivism and social-evolutionary theory: this is the *regressivist imputation*, the suggestion that mystical or participatory thinking emerging in an 'evolved' culture is a reprehensible throw-back to a defunct earlier behaviour or pattern of thinking. This negative view is corrosive in the study of divination, and it remains, regrettably, *de rigeur* for many scholars where contemporary practice is concerned. [3] Lévy-Bruhl himself was sensitive to these criticisms, and by the end of his life he rethought his definitions, abandoning the idea of the pre-logical (Littleton, op.cit. xxi). This has enhanced rather than lessened his theory, and his seminal contribution is at last receiving the attention it deserves.

Lévy-Bruhl's descriptions are fruitful for the analysis of divination in contemporary as well as in primitive culture; on the other hand there are limitations to the theory as it has come down to us, exposed by several of his critics, and especially E.E. Evans-Pritchard. On the subject of traditional African divination Evans-Pritchard appears at first sight to contradict Lévy-Bruhl's theories, but I suggest that his views come closer to the ideas of Lévy-Bruhl than

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[2]   Scott Littleton's Introduction is significantly titled 'Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and the Concept of Cognitive Relativity'. This gives a valuable overview of early criticisms and a review of the influence of Lévy-Bruhl in anthropology, and addresses misconceptions about the idea of 'primitive mentality'. Contemporary sensitivity about ethnocentrism and criticisms of a simple evolutionary model of culture have challenged previously taken-for-granted anthropological concepts, but I do not think we should be coy about the practical usefulness of the naming of 'primitive', provided we are aware of pejorative (or romanticised) connotations. The term is relatively unproblematic, and best matches Lévy-Bruhl's usage, when it refers to preliterate tribal cultures with ritualised codes of interrelationship, and with limited technological capacity.

[3]   The regressivist imputation, together with its correlates, often slips by under the guise of modern liberal scholarship and it is plain in an authority such as Vickers (1984, pp.95-6). It is also common in interpretations borrowed from psychoanalysis, where individuals who manifest behaviours such as a belief in divination are felt to be immature or otherwise stunted in intellectual development (Freud, 1973, p.70). However, my remarks are not intended to suggest that every interpretation of regression is *ipso facto* necessarily faulty.

either he and some other critics appear to realise. In any case, criticisms allow us to test Lévy-Bruhl's original thesis. The apparent contradictions that emerge are, I suggest, resolved in the concept of the 'cognitive continuum', described at the end of this discussion.

Participation Mystique

I will first outline major tenets of Lévy-Bruhl's theory, before bringing them to bear on the specific question of omens and divination. The most important of his concepts is that of *participation mystique*.[4] This covers a multiplicity of behaviours and beliefs that never failed to exasperate and confound the European missionaries and administrators visited upon the reciprocally perplexed natives. It is a foundation of reality, forming an autonomous socially conditioned backdrop for every act of cognition, and therefore hardly capable of being distinctly abstracted and discriminated by the primitive mind, which can know no different; it is the anthropologist who abstracts it and names it as participation, and the category is therefore as much about the anthropologist as it is about the native. It is known to us in some measure from our own cultural history in the principle of sympathetic magic where, for example, the hair from someone's head can be used to influence or harm its original owner. So for some primitives, a man's shadow is also the man and striking a footprint strikes the man. Participation is likely to be observed between a single representative of a species and the species; if one wrongly treats the carcass of one caribou, then all caribou may be offended and refuse to let themselves be hunted. On the other hand resemblance and commonality of species do not in themselves account for participation; of two bushes one may be seen as having a special significance for a spirit, a person or the tribe, while another apparently identical bush is given no special significance, or an unrelated significance (eg. Lévy-Bruhl, 1923, p.117). The participatory significance of any given entity may change or even be reversed as circumstances change.[5] Different tribes also vary in their codes of signification, so that natural phenomena or human attributes are given participatory meanings specific to a particular culture.

It may seem simple for us to envisage participation as a strong emotional association. Who does not have such an experience? We may readily extrapolate from this experience to folk superstition and sympathetic magic believed in even today by superstitious people. There is an abundant literature from the classical period to illustrate this thinking (see for eg. Dodds, 1951). Through these intermediaries we might hope to project our imagination into the mind-set of the few surviving genuine aboriginals, or to our native ancestors far back before the dawn of our own civilisation. For Lévy-Bruhl, however, such a supposition is in error, and it has to be undone before primitive mentality may be understood. The error arises when we fail

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[4]   The word 'participation' is used by Lévy-Bruhl as an abbreviation for *participation mystique*; I use it in the current study with this meaning. Participation mystique implies something more intimately compounded and 'consubstantial' than a simple idea of separate things (or people) being mutually interactive. There is some ambiguity in Lévy-Bruhl as to whether participation is in our terms supernatural (and therefore 'mystical'). Ambiguity goes with the territory and may not be wholly capable of resolution.

[5]   Lévi-Strauss (1972, pp.51-2) gives an example from eagle-hunting by the American Hidatsa Indians, where the ritual meaning of menstrual blood, treated in many cultures as polluting, reverses to mean abundance depending on circumstance. Here we find a typical example of the semiological potential of structuralism in the interpretation by Lévi-Strauss of the *meaning* of the symbolic equation. This, he suggests, expresses the polarity 'distance-closeness' of hunter and prey for two different stages of the hunt. This example indicates that structuralist interpretations need not be seen as necessarily inconsistent with Lévy-Bruhl's approach.

to recognise that for the primitive there are not already two logically distinct objects linked by affective association. Participation is *the way in which* there are objects for seeing, and there is no entity apart from its participations.

In the eyes of critics such as Paul Radin, Lévy-Bruhl has confused aesthetic and affective association for a different mode of thinking.[6] This criticism may be, at least in part, a reaction to the implicit challenge to our presuppositions concerning reason and logic. For Lévy-Bruhl, *primitive mentality does not privilege abstraction*; or, to the extent that it does abstract, this is not in the form in which *we* know it. In taking up an entity as an entity we see it already in relation to its predicates, which constitute a set of logical conditions defining the entity. The highly developed way in which we construe these logical conditions, going back to Aristotle, is 'natural' for us. Yet it is exactly because of this habit of our own thinking that we are misled when we think about participation. Lévy-Bruhl demonstrates this to great effect by showing how the scholar will commonly – and mistakenly - apply a conventional understanding of the *pars pro toto*, taken to be the principle of sympathetic magic, and project its logic onto the primitive (Lévy-Bruhl, 1975, pp.84-6). Of course, we think, a part is a part of a whole, and this is the basis of the logic of the primitive's understanding of a relationship whereby the part stands for the whole. Believing we have grasped the founding logic of this conception, we imagine that the primitive's error of thinking lies not in the logical relation (with which we agree, for the part is indeed necessarily a part of a greater whole), but in the magical efficacy granted to the logical relation. For Lévy-Bruhl, however, the primitive does not even construe the part-whole logical relation as we do. Strictly speaking, for the primitive there is not as such a 'relation', because that would imply two things standing apart but brought together. They are not 'apart' in the way that they are for us.

The non-abstractive nature of primitive mentality manifests in the treatment of number, which is seen concretely in the objects numerated and is not abstracted into a universal and immaterial category. Counting therefore does not proceed as enumeration in the manner we take for granted, since 'one is not a number like the other numbers' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1975, p.144). Lévy-Bruhl relates this to the visual character of non-abstractive counting. The not-numberness of one is because we have turtle, not 'one' turtle. A pair of turtles is concretely a definite and particular situation, and the difference is something other than the logical predication of the abstracted number two to turtleness. Singleness is a not-pair and a not-many, and is something other than the first unit of counting as in 'one, two, three...' This underscores the theme that *divination does not belong to a count of instances*, but takes root in a non-enumerated 'unique case' of its own instantiation. The unique case is a not-pair, not-many, a singleton that is simply itself. At this point we arrive at fundamental concept in any hermeneutics of divination, derived here from Lévy-Bruhl's definition of participation: each omen is the unique case, and each divination is its own unique case of interpretation.

Meant-ness and Address in the Unique Case

Omen-reading and divination emerge as amongst the most important of all manifestations of the *participation mystique*. They will also be, for us, amongst the least understood:

> Even the most complete description possible of the divining process does not

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[6]   Radin (1957, p.246) describes the subjective impression on the primitive of the 'blaze of reality', so difficult for us to appreciate: 'An aura envelops every object in the external world due to the projection of this inward thrill upon it.' For Radin, in disagreement with Lévy-Bruhl, this does not entail a different perception of the object *qua* object.

disclose all its meaning... Where we find symbolic relations... [primitive mentality] feels a close participation. This cannot be expressed in our thought, nor even in our languages, which are much more conceptual than those of primitives. The term which would express it best in this connection would be the 'momentary identity of substance.'

<div align="right">(Lévy-Bruhl, 1923, p.197. Brackets show my insert)</div>

'Identity of substance' emerges as a consistent theme for Lévy-Bruhl, and is another facet of participation; it means something more than linking two distinct things together in a correspondence of 'symbolic relations' akin to the *pars pro toto*; it suggests instead our notion of identity. Elsewhere he expresses the same theme as bi-presence, dual-units, and 'a consubstantiality which our languages lack a word to express (Lévy-Bruhl, 1975, pp.69-71). An important consequence for any theory of divination is that the conceptual distinction we make between signs and causes may be quite foreign to the primitive. The omen and the spirit-agency intending it become identified, or 'consubstantial'. Further, the omen is seen as fully implicated in the event that it portends; indeed, it is *also* the event it portends. It follows that in averting the omen, the event it signifies is averted (Lévy-Bruhl, 1923, pp.143-8). Equally, the making of divination is a making of the event being divined (ibid, pp.197-8).

It is therefore possible to secure an understanding of the unique case in divinatory interpretation, at least within the context of primitive mentality. This relates to the singularity and particularity of the circumstances of an omen, or any situation or event taken to have an ominous implication. Any striking event, circumstance, or showing is understood as concrete, particular, and non-abstracted:

> Participation has reality only in so far as it is felt by an individual (even if similar participations occur at the same moment amongst various members of the group who have, for example, a single mystical experience). It is thus an event which occurs *hic et nunc*, localised in space and time, or better said which has its own space and time.

<div align="right">(Lévy-Bruhl, 1975, p.59)</div>

This is why every omen is the unique case; 'it is indeed revealing, but revealing only of itself' (ibid, p.59). The meaningfulness of such an ominous situation is therefore not understood as a logical generality indifferently affecting anyone and everyone in the vicinity. Rather, it is directed to some particular individual or group of individuals: 'the omen affects those to whom it is pointed' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1923, p.142). Since the omen is not a product either of general laws or of contingent causes - although the primitive may be quite capable of including these interpretations of the event itself - it is understood as a particular and non-ordinary ('mystical') intentional action, communication or warning. In order to convey this in our conceptual terms, this may be termed the *address* of the omen.[7] The omen is not simply meaningful, it is *meant*; and because its meant-ness depends not on logical predication but on affectivity, the omen is addressed to the individual for whom it is felt to be meant. By corollary, in seeking an omen or in responding to the spirit-world, it is a common (though not exclusive) pattern for the primitive in turn to specifically address the volitional agency: prayers, appeals and imprecations are offered, not only to spirits in general, but to named

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[7]   Address is my term, not Lévy-Bruhl's. Divinatory address is affective, contextual and contingent, and depends on the circumstantial meant-ness for the participant(s) who 'just happen' to be involved. The foundation of the unique case in its contingent context is explored in the practice of astrology by Cornelius (1994, 2003) ch.11.

spirits and ancestors, or equally to the objects manipulated in divination (Lévy-Bruhl, 1923, esp. ch. 6 & 7).

As indicated in the above quotations from Lévy-Bruhl, the suggestion is that the primitive attitude to divination 'cannot be expressed in our thought', and this polarised view is characteristic of his earlier work. By the time of his late 'Notebooks' Lévy-Bruhl considerably softens the polarisation by suggesting that 'there is a mystical mentality which is more marked and more easily observable among 'primitive peoples' than in our own societies, but it is present in every human mind' (Lévy-Bruhl, 1975, p.101). This broadening of scope retains the distinction between different modes of cognition, but allows the possibility of extending his analysis to divinatory and related phenomena wherever they may manifest. Where an abstractive mode becomes dominant, we expect the collective patterns shaping and reshaping divinatory practice to show complex variations, differing with each culture and historical epoch. Despite such cultural relativity, if Lévy-Bruhl's supposition is correct, then it provides a theoretical basis for examining the thought process involved in divination across times and cultures. It is on this basis that I interpret Lévy-Bruhl's approach as providing a methodological foundation for the study of divination.

We are therefore able to pose basic questions to divinatory practice, historical and contemporary, sophisticated and primitive: does divination entail an altered mode of thinking, a switch from an everyday orientation to the 'mystical mentality'? Further, to what extent does this entail what the primitive recognises as spirit-agency? Critics of Lévy-Bruhl do not accept the need to divide cognition, primitive or modern, into two different modes in order to explain the beliefs and practices of divination. These may be sufficiently explained within the terms of our ordinary cognitions, thought processes, and logic, shaped by the collective cultural patterns, reasonable or otherwise, of practitioners. We can see that this debate is of a piece with the dispute over participation, which emerges as the central issue; only the theorist who accepts the feasibility of Lévy-Bruhl's description of *participation mystique* is likely to accept the possibility of a related 'mystical' process in divination.

With Lévy-Bruhl's help we have established an argument for *address* and the *unique case* as primary elements in the hermeneutics of divination. However, utilising his thesis depends on sustaining a distinction between ordinary and mystical cognition, and demonstrating that this distinction applies generally to divination. There is no doubt that it is applicable to some practices of divination, especially those involving manifestly altered states of consciousness, for instance in ritual or trance-induced states. But, just as Lévy-Bruhl's description of primitive mentality has been criticised by many anthropologists, so there are major forms of divination that do not seem to involve any special cognitive process. If this is so, a significant qualification and development of the original thesis is required. With these questions in mind, I turn to accounts of divinatory practice that do not indicate special skills or initiation, and which do not induce any obvious change in mental state, which is the hallmark of the affectivity seen by Lévy-Bruhl as characteristic of the working of the mystical.

Binary and non-symbolic divination

Selected accounts of traditional African divination are discussed with two main purposes in view. The first purpose is to further delimit the category of inductive divination, and to indicate primary hermeneutic elements that, it is argued, are characteristic of divinatory interpretation as a whole, and across cultures. We are therefore continuing with the project of defining terms of hermeneutic analysis begun above. The second purpose is to suggest a necessary qualification to the fundamental thesis of Lévy-Bruhl, since the forms discussed

here do not immediately match his descriptions of participation. I start with accounts of elementary binary forms offered by E.E. Evans-Pritchard in his well-known monograph on divinatory and magical practice amongst the Azande, undertaken between 1929 and the late 1930's (Evans-Pritchard, 1937).[8] Evans-Pritchard is an ideal source for our purposes, not only because of the authority of his fieldwork, but also because he is an attentive and fair critic of Lévy-Bruhl. Like many anthropologists of his generation, he has to deal with or rebut the French philosopher's theories.

The binary forms discussed by Evans-Pritchard depend on a conventionally predetermined pair of opposite responses, essentially a 'yes' or a 'no', and do not entail further symbolic interpretation; for this reason I designate them as ***non-symbolic forms of inductive divination***. The most authoritative of these binary oracles is the Poison oracle, where a chicken would be given *benge* poison, and its death or survival would be taken as the oracle's response 'yes' or 'no' to a question put to it. In gaining the trust of the Azande, Evans-Pritchard regularly used this oracle and took its verdicts seriously: 'I may remark that I found this as satisfactory a way of running my home and affairs as any other I know of' (ibid, p.270).[9] The possibility of an effective usage of an oracle without sharing fundamental beliefs of the culture in which it arises is an intriguing question that I shall attempt to address further on in this discussion.

The *mapingo* oracle is a useful starting point in illustrating the Azande attitude to the most elementary forms of divination (ibid, pp.358-9). This oracle is used to determine whether a proposed new location or dwelling will be fortunate for an individual. Oracles are generally the preserve of men, but this particular oracle may be employed by women and children. Three smooth and firm large twigs are cut to about 10 to 15 cm in length; two are placed side by side on the ground at the location and the third is laid gently on them, lengthwise, in such a way that if the twigs are disturbed by a draught or a small creature then they will separate, allowing the third twig to drop to the earth. A brief invocation is made, and the twigs are left overnight. If the twigs remain undisturbed then it is a fortunate omen.

The *mapingo* is a minor oracle, and its showing is therefore a minor showing. It may be underwritten or annulled by a more authoritative divination; in effect, therefore, an individual receiving an answer that is not trusted or seems disadvantageous has recourse to a more authoritative oracle, such as the rubbing board (ibid, pp.358-74),[10] or the termite oracle. Here

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[8] The abridged edition (1976) includes a useful introduction describing the context and influence of the original work, with additional details on Azande culture. Significant materials on the methods of divination have however been omitted.

[9] (1976, p.126). This is a magnificently unorthodox statement for a European anthropologist of his generation. Cf. p.367, where he comments on the efficacy of the rubbing-board oracle when approached in the correct way (ie. not with a desire to immediately test its accuracy): 'when I asked it questions in more general terms, as the Zande does, it gave me straight affirmative or negative replies, and usually correct ones.'

[10] The rubbing-board is the most frequently consulted of Azande oracles, used by certain middle aged or old men (who need not be witch-doctors), who make their own rubbing boards after having taken appropriate medicines ('medicine' = a potion made from various items, and imbued with power). A small wooden device consisting of a 'male' top is pushed over a 'female' surface with a handle, held firmly by the operator. Medicine oil, and some water, is put on the surface. In a consultation the top is pushed firmly over the female surface. If it sticks on being pushed over the female surface, this is considered to be 'affirmative' or a specific indicator (for instance, if a name is mentioned to the oracle); a smooth slide is usually taken to be 'no' or no indication. If the board alternately sticks and runs, it shows that the oracle is not prepared to answer.

two sticks are placed in a termite-run overnight; whichever stick is eaten gives the answer. The Azande assume the termites are listening to their request, but they may also address their enquiry to the trees which provide the sticks, suggesting that 'the oracle as a whole' is considered to provide an answer, rather than a specific intelligence of either termites or trees (ibid, pp.352-7).[11]

The most authoritative of all, above even the pronouncements of the witch-doctors, is the Poison oracle. There is a definite ranking of these oracles, and the result of a higher-ranked oracle will not be further tested by an oracle inferior to it (ibid, p.352). This makes evident that we need to distinguish *a generalised truth-status granted to the realm of the oracular* from the specific manifestation of the oracular in any particular instance. This necessitates in each divination an act of validation by the one seeking the oracle, who must decide as to its meaningfulness, and whether to act on its advice; validation or non-validation is inseparable from the act of divination itself. This is why we encounter a pragmatic attitude amongst users of divination, with the possibility of a negotiation of oracles, where one is played off against another.

Even where an oracle is granted near-ultimate authority, as with the Poison oracle conducted under the direction of the Chief, the highest principle of Azande law prior to European colonisation, the principle of validation remains in operation (ibid, pp.292-3, 343-4). The Chief may decide that the oracle-medicine has been subverted by sorcery, or otherwise exercise his prerogative of justice and mercy.

I suggest that the reports provided by Evans-Pritchard allow us to distinguish different components in play in the interpretation of divination even in the simplest incidents, revealing the tension that exists between the authority granted to the realm of the oracular and the pragmatic necessity of choice at the heart of the particular instance of interpretation. There is a coming together of the intention to divine, the formal act of divination, and a validation (acceptance or rejection) of the particular divination. The 'meaning' of the divination, and its efficacy in further action by the individual, resides in this complex of acts and understandings. In the case of the binary oracles of the Azande, the formal ritual of divination, its interpretation, its validation, and its following through into action, are quite likely to be undertaken by one and the same individual. In more sophisticated divinatory forms these functions emerge as distinct roles taken up by, or negotiated between, different individuals, the diviner and the enquirer.

Truth and Pre-sentiment

The principal foundation of any possibility of divination is a belief in oracles and omens. By 'belief' is meant something more than the theoretical positing of a possible truth to oracles, but a commitment in practice to the taking of oracles and to the enactment of what oracles show. In common with all traditional and primitive cultures known to anthropologists, the Azande in general take for granted that there is a realm of the oracular, and that it has within its scope an unquestioned authority of truthfulness. It is 'truth'. Individuals will vary

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[11]　　The termite oracle is available to men and women. Two branches from different types of trees, *dakpa* and *kpopo* are stuck into the termite run. The different trees have a different symbolic status in that *dakpa* signals misfortune for the enquirer or his family if this is eaten; *kpopo* signals good fortune. If both branches are eaten it is a complex answer showing there are qualifying conditions at work in the situation; neither branch eaten shows the oracle is not responding.

considerably in their use of divination, and in the trust they place in particular forms and in particular practitioners, but any scepticism is likely to be within the context of an acceptance of the unquestioned foundation of oracular truth: 'Azande are only sceptical of particular oracles and not oracles in general' (ibid, p.350). The belief in oracles and omens characteristic of primitive culture is the necessary taken-for-granted context, the *pre-sentiment* that allows in advance the granting of meaning to the divination or the omen. I have chosen 'presentiment' as a key idea in the study of divination since the word is appropriate from a strictly hermeneutic point of view and in addition is commonly employed in descriptions of clairvoyance and divination to indicate a paranormal future intimation. In this discussion the word is used without the hyphen, but this should be imagined when it is being employed in its exact hermeneutic sense.

In a culture that accepts omens, their previsionary potential, and a faith that they shall show themselves when needed, is granted to them in advance of any particular showing. This presentiment is therefore the prerequisite basis for taking up any omen as meaningful even where its specific meaning remains obscure. The particular forms of divination, the mechanics and methods, are of a secondary status to this presentiment. Individuals are likely to recognise it and therefore recognise the intentionality of divination, even if this intention is articulated in a form of practice they have never before encountered. This founding presentiment constitutes a universal element of divination, identifiable across cultures.

Evans-Pritchard's admission that he employed several Azande oracles, in particular the poison oracle, but also the rubbing board, is no doubt an amusing provocation for some of his academic peers; it carries wider significance for our current inquiry. It raises a question mark against the universal validity of the presentiment of divination discussed above. The question arises because it would hardly be satisfactory to declare that simply because Evans-Pritchard, or a curious modern reader of his text, does not see things as do the Azande villagers then what he has done is not 'really' divination, especially if a divinatory result is allowed to influence his conduct. In the case of the ethnographer who is a participant observer in the culture, then such practice is part of immersion in the life of the tribe, as important as speaking the language and honouring, if not wholly following, the mores and taboos. But this example reminds us that there is necessarily a halfway house in such practices, where they are 'gone along with' either as a matter of social convention, or as an experiment for the curious-minded.

Even within a culture steeped in oracles many divinations may therefore be undertaken in a provisional or even sceptical manner, with a commitment that is conventional or ambiguous rather than whole-hearted. This, however, should not obscure the collective and cultural foundation of understanding enframing the act: namely that divination bears upon meaningfulness and truth, revealing certain things in a way that goes beyond ordinary modes of perception and reasoning. It is this enframement, the relationship with meaningfulness and truth however variously conceived, that is foundational for divination. It is this that differentiates divination from apparently divination-like procedures, such as selecting individuals by drawing lots, or the convention of throwing a coin to decide the order or direction of play in sport. The distinction is seen when we observe that in these cases the intention of the act is not an enquiry into some hidden meaning but is a matter of convenient procedure established by the agreement of the interested parties. It is therefore a conventional mode of employing a random outcome, rather than an act of divination. The outcome is likely to favour one of the parties, but however it falls out it is put down to blind chance, a matter of good or bad luck, rather than to any discernible meaning in the event. We also note that there can be no scope for pragmatic post-facto validation of the outcome - provided there has been

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an unambiguous toss of the coin, neither the referee nor the team captains are permitted to disagree with the outcome. There lingers a hint of the arbitration of truth characteristic of divination in that all parties understand that an outcome left to chance is necessarily 'fair'. But this is a shadow of divination,[12] and even if some individuals involved load the random event with affectivity or a sense of meaningfulness, a common phenomenon with superstitious sports fans, or in effect read the event as an omen, we remain in an obscure halfway territory of divination rather than encountering the meaningful validation and interpretation of divination in its authentic and whole-hearted form.

Although acknowledging variability in attitudes and intentions might appear to weaken the consistency of any analysis, the hermeneutic category of divinatory validation and its relation to an enframing meaningfulness remains clearly in view. This may be asserted because at the instant that someone permits their behaviour to be influenced by the outcome of divination on the ground that it might in any degree give a meaningful signification of an otherwise unrecognised truth, then whatever the nature of the presentiment, the act of divination has been fulfilled. Even the individual who simply goes along with what rest of the tribe does has assented to the enactment of divination, whereby a spirit-like or non-causally related signification has been publicly declared to show the truth.

Several of the oracles favoured by the Azande, and in particular their authoritative poison Oracle, have an elementary binary form, returning a simple yes or no answer to the question put to them. For reasons that will become clear, I refer to this and similar modes of inductive divination as *non-symbolic*. This pattern is not restricted to African divination, neither is it an exception for simple binary or single-choice non-symbolic forms to be given a high status; this is evidenced in ancient sources including the *urim* and *thummim* of the early Israelite priests (Jeffers, 1996). An authoritative practice in Roman augury involved a yes or no response from chickens pecking or not pecking at corn scattered before them (North, 1990, p.53).

The authority of inductive divination is a function not of the mechanics of divination but of the significance of the context, including the status of the one seeking or officiating in the divination. Although it may suffer no obvious lack of authority, the binary form may appear crude and limited, since all that is available is yes or no, good fortune or bad fortune, act or do not act. Restricted to a simple choice, validation becomes an equally simple acceptance or rejection, without pragmatic subtlety or any grey area of negotiation. However, from Evans-Pritchard's meticulous account of the poison oracle, the elementary binary form is much enhanced by a sophisticated method of cross-referenced multiple submissions of the same question, or directly related questions (Evans-Pritchard, op. cit., pp.299ff).

For an important matter where much depends on the oracle's answer, the same enquiry may be put in several ways. It might first be put in positive form (should I marry this woman?), so that chicken lives equals 'yes', chicken dies equals 'no'; then repeated for the reverse outcome, so that chicken dies equals 'yes', chicken lives equals 'no'; and then reversed in meaning (will marriage to this woman bring ill-fortune to me?), so that chicken lives equals 'yes' (therefore do not marry) and chicken dies equals 'no' (therefore no harm in the marriage). This is just one example of a variety of permutations of enquiry and response available in a divination session involving the ritual administration of poison to four or five separate chickens in turn.

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[12]   Our attitude to randomness as an arbiter of truth, shown in the preeminence of statistical methods in modern science is the inverse of divinatory understanding.

It is usual for other enquirers, or proxies attending on their behalf, to put their own different questions to one or more of the chicken trials, so that at any instant the chicken's survival might determine a 'yes' or 'no' for several unrelated questions. This multiple usage may reflect the fact that the Poison oracle involves a degree of preparation for an established householder, quite apart from the difficulties and expense of obtaining the *benge* poison and the sacrifice of valuable chickens. However, it seems likely that beyond this material consideration the greater significance of the oracle lies in the social nature of the event. The tribesman, says Evans-Pritchard, is never happier than when he is attending the poison oracle and discussing the implications of its results with his fellows (ibid, p.91). For Azande culture, 'the oracle is one of the most important institutions of social life', creating a binding weave of common concern and serving as an arbiter of truth and conduct (ibid, p.261).

Establishing the poison oracle's consistency over the divinatory session is crucial to its validation. An ideal session giving assurance to all participants will be where there is a balance of chickens living and chickens dying, say two or three of each, with consistent answers given to multiple or reversed questions. If there is inconsistency because all the chickens live, then the *benge* is weak or exhausted. If the oracles are inconsistent because too many of the chickens die, then the *benge* is strong and unruly, and its wildness means that it is not prepared to answer truly. There remains the further occasional possibility of sorcery or witchcraft interfering with the oracle in order to cover the tracks of a guilty party (ibid, p.328-35).[13]

It is clear from a consideration of the poison oracle that the form of the response does not involve a pre-given symbolism. 'Chicken live' or 'chicken die' may arbitrarily mean 'yes', 'no', 'lucky' or 'unlucky', depending on the prior choice of the diviner in that instance. If we return briefly to the *mapingo* oracle, we might be tempted to speculate that the dislocation of the twigs is suggestive of a disturbance in the harmony of the proposed location, perhaps even of the 'fall' of whatever might be built there, prefigured by the fall of the middle twig. This is an appealing possibility, and it may enhance the plausibility and appeal, and therefore the cultural authority, of this particular oracle. However, as the poison oracle demonstrates, what is of primary importance is not symbolic appropriateness but an unambiguous result one way or the other, capable of interpretation by a non-specialist diviner and readily agreed upon by his or her associates.

Since the binary form involves a non-symbolic conventional or predetermined pair of responses, the oracle's decision does not require a mediating interpretation. No special skill is required to interpret the answer 'yes' or 'no', although experience in the conventions of the poison oracle will be necessary to deal with the variables of validation raised by inconsistent oracles. The binary form is therefore publicly accessible and suited to the lay or non-initiated diviner. The characteristic of oracular immediacy in non-symbolic inductive divination, requiring no intermediate act of interpretation, is not in principle limited to the binary form. It is found in popular expressions of European divination such as 'Napoleon's Oracle' or the Victorian flower oracle, where by a purely mechanical procedure a specific answer, laid out in advance in a table of answers, is derived for the question put to the oracle.

The commonplace nature of much divination, conducted by ordinary villagers rather than by ritual specialists or witch-doctors, raises a question concerning the adequacy of Lévy-Bruhl's definitions. These practices, while empirically ill-founded according to our preconceptions,

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[13]   Evans-Pritchard (1937) pp.329-35.

are nevertheless often conducted in a relatively rational manner; they may involve public and non-expert participation, and they do not appear to depend on marked alterations in consciousness. The poison oracle and the rubbing-board oracle are not casually performed, but they do not carry the weight of supernatural trappings sometimes associated with divination. The poison oracle medicine, *benge*, is talked about in a literal and practical way. On the other hand, if we start to pull apart Lévy-Bruhl's analysis, we are left with a problem of defining the spectrum of practices commonly grouped, across cultures, as 'divination'. In other words, there is an immense variety of practices and behaviours named under this heading, yet despite this the practice is broadly identifiable across cultures. Every culture knows people who make divination or contact the spirits, and every culture has recourse to these people to seek out their answers to both practical and spiritual questions.

Part of the problem lies with Lévy-Bruhl's early polarised statement of 'pre-logical' mentality, leading to a definition of participation seemingly removed both from some commonplace primitive practice and from our own contemporary experience. Lévy-Bruhl's later thinking reduces the polarisation; however, a more satisfactory model of the 'cognitive continuum' has been suggested. This is capable of bringing the essential insights of *participation mystique* within a broader scope, while taking on board the relevance of Evans-Pritchard's findings.

The Cognitive Continuum as the spectrum of participation

The *cognitive continuum* represents a significant contribution to the study of divination. It is the name given by Barbara Tedlock to a concept derived from her own field studies, and from observations by other anthropologists (Tedlock, 2001). Tedlock notes that descriptions given by diviners themselves commonly distinguish distinct modes of knowing through divination, located along a cognitive spectrum. As an illustration of this understanding, she refers to a graphic question-and-answer session between M. Kohler, a white doctor, and Sikhumbana, an experienced Zulu *sangoma* (or *isangoma*), published in 1941. I give this section of text in full because of its significance with respect to various facets of primitive divination discussed here, and especially the idea of 'medicine':

> Question: How is divination done?
> Answer: There are three ways:-
>
> 1. Divination through *imilozi*
>
> This is done with the medicines of the ancestor spirits. These are medicines used to make the diviners vomit, so that the spirits may speak by whistling. These *imilozi* do not speak from the person of the diviner but from the roof of the hut, and then the diviner interprets what the spirit has said. If something has got lost, the spirits are consulted and explain in what place it is. Or if the owner of a lost article asks them to fetch it, they do so and he gets it back. The spirits can bring the things to where the *isangoma* and the owner are, and lay it before them.
>
> 2. Divining with bones
>
> Here the *isangoma* is given enlightenment about the bones by the medicine which he prepares and uses as an emetic, in this fashion that when he whisks up the medicine, he puts the bones in it, and takes them out again when he has vomited. He puts bones in the medicine so that they will tell him exactly what

his client wants. It is the medicine which will show the bones (what to reveal).

  When a person comes to a diviner, he says, "I have come to consult the bones," but without saying more. Thereupon the *isangoma* throws his bones, and names all the matters his client is complaining about.

  When the *isangoma* has divined correctly, he gets the payment he demands, and this fee varies according to the nature of the case.

3. Divining with the head

A diviner who divines by his head (without any tangible device to help him), instructs his client to contradict him if he should say what was not true, but if he spoke the truth to cry, *"Siyavuma"* (We assent).

  Should a person maintain that the diviner has not told the truth, the latter says, "Very well, I do not take your money," for he only takes payment if he has divined correctly.   (Kohler, 1941)

According to Tedlock, divination through the spirits is *intuitive*, while at the other end of the spectrum we find a rational and *inductive* interpretation of the arrangement of bones informed by the medicine (in our modern view, falling out by chance). Between these poles is divination with the head, an *interpretive* approach 'which is neither purely a non-rational possession nor a purely rational inductive process of examination of tangible objects or natural events'. The intuitive pole manifests in an affective *presentation*, a direct experience, bodily sensation, or spirit-possession. The rational-inductive interpretation, entering into narrative and communicable expression, becomes *re-presentation*, where the meaning is successively negotiated in dialogue or talked-about as an interpretation. The meaning arises wholly in the unique case: 'divination is *applied* epistemology: it does not operate independently of the particular question before the diviner and the client' (Tedlock, op. cit., pp.191-2). [14]

A significant feature of Barbara Tedlock's approach is that she offers a theoretical distinction of modes that gives them complementary rather than contradictory functions. This in turn allows us to locate common themes in a spectrum of divinatory practices, from simple binary oracles to trance possession, from rational objectivity to directly and affectively experienced *participation*, with guesswork, metaphorical narrative and creative imagination moving back and forth along the centre of the spectrum. This represents an advance in our description of divination and our understanding of 'divinatory intelligence', since we may infer from Sikhumbana's description that the idea of divination is not dependent on the mode of its delivery – whether by head, bones or spirits – but operates by virtue of 'medicine'. Although in the description above 'medicine' is omitted from mention in one of the categories, it appears from the many instances recorded by Evans-Pritchard that this mysterious power is the abiding principle for the magical or divinatory act wherever it has efficacy (see for eg. Evans-Pritchard op. cit. p.315). 'It is the medicine that will show the bones', says Sikhumbana, just as for the Azande 'dance of divination' the witch-doctor seeks his divinatory knowledge as he 'goes into the soul of the medicine…[until it] will stand alert within him' (ibid p.176).

If indeed we may talk about a principle of abstraction in primitive divination, then 'medicine' must occupy that role; but it is an abstraction that is at the same time embodied and

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[14]   Tedlock (1992) p.171.

experienced, and manifested in countless physical forms. Further, the essential feature of the pre-sentiment that renders divination and the divinatory dialogue effective, coupled with the context-determined and unique *address* of the omen or oracular pronouncement, defines this act as divination and as an expression of *participation mystique.*

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