

Witchcraft, Oracles,
and Magic among
the Azande

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ABRIDGED WITH AN INTRODUCTION
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CHAPTER VIII

The Poison Oracle in Daily Life

I

ORACLES are a more satisfactory means of ascertaining the future, and hidden things of the present, than are witch-doctors. Witch-doctors are useful as sleuths for seeking out the many affairs of a group of homesteads, and their chief value is that they generally clear the atmosphere of witchcraft. On this account they are often asked to dance before a big hunt because this is a joint undertaking, many persons are involved, and the interests of a district are at stake. A public attack by witch-doctors, who act as ritual skirmishers to report on and to counter the mystical forces in opposition, is appropriate. When the seance is over people feel that witches have been scared from their undertaking.

But as diviners witch-doctors are not regarded as furnishing more than preliminary evidence, and in all matters of moment a man takes a witch-doctor's statement and places it before one of the greater oracles for corroboration. This is, moreover, necessary if a man wishes to take any public action. He cannot try to exact vengeance for homicide on the evidence of a witch-doctor alone. A witch-doctor would never be consulted on such a matter. A man would be very ill-advised even to present a fowl's wing to a witch accused solely by witch-doctors. The accused might mock the bearer of the wing and would not lose esteem for doing so. Hence Azande say that witch-doctors, like the rubbing-board oracle, are useful because they can answer quickly many questions and sort out suspects in a preliminary manner before men approach the poison oracle, but that they are not dependable.

II

The method of revealing what is hidden by administering poison to fowls has a wide extension in Africa; but just as the Azande are the most north-easterly people who have the notion

of witchcraft as a material substance in the belly, so also is their culture the north-easterly limit of the distribution of this type of oracle. They are the only people in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan who employ it.

The poison used is a red powder manufactured from a forest creeper and mixed with water to a paste. The liquid is squeezed out of the paste into the beaks of small domestic fowls which are compelled to swallow it. Generally violent spasms follow. The doses sometimes prove fatal, but as often the fowls recover. Sometimes they are even unaffected by the poison. From the behaviour of fowls under this ordeal, especially by their death or survival, Azande receive answers to the questions they place before the oracle.

The botanical nature of the poison has not been determined, but its chemical nature has been roughly analysed. Some of the oracle poison which I brought back to England was examined by Professor R. Robinson who informs me that:

The quantity of *benge* was insufficient to enable me to establish with certainty the nature of the active principle. All that can be said about it is that the toxic substance is alkaloidal in character and appears to be related chemically to strychnine. It is almost certainly not homogeneous, and this accounts for the difficulty of isolation in a pure condition. Thus, all I can say is that it is strychnine-like in many of its reactions, and that probably two or more bases are present.

III

The poison oracle, *benge*, is by far the most important of the Zande oracles. Zande rely completely on its decisions, which have the force of law when obtained on the orders of a prince. A visitor to Zandeland hears as much of the poison oracle as he hears of witchcraft, for whenever a question arises about the facts of a case or about a man's well-being they at once seek to know the opinion of the poison oracle on the matter. In many situations where we seek to base a verdict upon evidence or try to regulate our conduct by weighing of probabilities the Zande consults, without hesitation, the poison oracle and follows its directions with implicit trust.

No important venture is undertaken without authorization of the poison oracle. In important collective undertakings, in all crises of life, in all serious legal disputes, in all matters

strongly affecting individual welfare, in short, on all occasions regarded by Azande as dangerous or socially important, the activity is preceded by consultation of the poison oracle.

I do not wish to catalogue all situations in which the oracle may be consulted since this would mean a list of social situations in every sphere of Zande life, and when each sphere is described the part played by oracles is more fitly recorded than in the present place. Notwithstanding, it is desirable to list some of the occasions on which the oracle must be consulted in order to give the reader a clear idea of its significance to Azande. When I say that the poison oracle, or some other oracle, must be consulted on the occasions listed below, I mean that if a Zande were not to consult it he would be acting contrary to custom and might suffer in social prestige. He might even incur legal penalties. The following situations are typical occasions of consultation:

- To discover why a wife has not conceived.
- During pregnancy of wife, about place of delivery, about her safety in childbirth, and about the safety of her child.
- Before circumcision of son.
- Before marriage of daughter.
- Before sending son to act as page at court.
- In sickness of any member of family. Will he die? Who is the witch responsible? etc.
- To discover the agent responsible for any misfortune.
- At death of kinsman in the old days. Who killed him? Who will execute the witch? etc.
- Before exacting vengeance by magic. Who will keep the taboos? Who will make the magic? etc.
- In cases of sorcery.
- In cases of adultery.
- Before gathering oracle poison.
- Before making blood-brotherhood.
- Before long journeys.
- A man before marrying a wife.
- Before presenting a prince with beer.
- Before large-scale hunting.
- A commoner in choosing a new homestead site.
- Before accepting, or allowing a dependant to accept, European employment.
- Before becoming a witch-doctor.

- Before joining a closed association.
- A man before he and his adult sons go to war.
- In cases of disloyalty to a prince.
- A prince before making war.
- To determine disposition of warriors, place and time of attack, and all other matters pertaining to warfare.
- A prince before appointing governors, deputies, or any other officials.
- A prince before moving his court.
- A prince to discover whether a communal ceremony will terminate drought.
- A prince to determine the actions of the British District Commissioner.
- A prince before accepting presents and tribute.

IV

It is not only about what we would consider the more important social activities that Azande consult their oracles, but also about their smaller everyday affairs. If time and opportunity permitted many Azande would wish to consult one or other of the oracles about every step in their lives. This is clearly impossible, but old men who know how to use the rubbing-board oracle usually carry one about with them so that if any doubt arises they can quiet it by immediate consultation.

A typical occasion on which a man consults his rubbing-board oracle is when he is on a visit to a friend's homestead. When his visit is concluded he asks the oracle whether he had better leave openly during the daytime or depart secretly at night so that any witch who may wish to dispatch his witchcraft after him, to cause him some misfortune on the journey, may be ignorant that he has left. If the oracle advises him to depart at night he tells his host and leaves before dawn. Other members of the homestead understand what has happened and are not angry that he has not bid them farewell. Or the rubbing-board oracle may tell a man that he can depart in the daytime but must be careful about witchcraft on the way. In this case he strolls away from his host's homestead as though he were taking a short walk and throws a spear-shaft aimlessly in front of him so that people who observe him on the path think that he is playing and will shortly return from his stroll, since people departing on a journey do not meander at the start. When he

is well out of sight he quickens his steps and hastens on his way. Sometimes he does not even inform his host of his departure, but the host understands the reason for his silence.

I found that when a Zande acted towards me in a manner that we would call rude and untrustworthy his actions were often to be accounted for by obedience to his oracles. Usually I have found Azande courteous and reliable according to English standards, but sometimes their behaviour is unintelligible till their mystical notions are taken into account. Often Azande are tortuous in their dealings with one another, but they do not consider a man blameworthy for being secretive or acting contrary to his declared intentions. On the contrary, they praise his prudence for taking account of witchcraft at each step and for regulating his conduct after the direction of his oracles. Hence it is not necessary for one Zande to explain to another his waywardness, for everybody understands the motives of his conduct.

Not all Azande are equally prone to consult oracles. I have frequently observed that some men are more keenly aware of danger from witchcraft than others and rely far more than others upon magic and oracles to counteract its influence. Thus while some men like to consult oracles and to blow magic whistles or perform some other magic rite before embarking upon even small adventures, other men only consult oracles about important legal issues and at real crises, such as marriage, serious sickness, and death. When they are socially compelled to consult oracles they do so, but not otherwise. In legal procedure everyone must make use of the poison oracle.

To understand Zande legal procedure one must know exactly how the poison oracle is operated, because in the old days it was in itself the greater part of what we know as rules of evidence, judge, jury, and witnesses. In the past the two main types of cases were witchcraft and adultery. Witchcraft cases were settled entirely through the oracles since there was no possibility of discovering mystical action except through the mystical power of the poison oracle. All a prince had to do was to confirm the names of witches discovered by the kinsmen of dead persons by placing their names before his own oracle. The compensation which a witch had to pay for his crime was fixed by custom.

All death to Azande is murder and was the starting-point of the most important legal process in Zande culture. Azande therefore find it difficult to see how Europeans can refuse to take cognizance of what is so manifest and so shocking to them.

In a case of adultery there might be circumstantial evidence, but in fact simple cases of this kind were rare. The chance discovery of lovers during a few minutes' congress in the bush or during the absence of a husband from his homestead was small. The only certain evidence upon which a suspicious husband could act was that provided by the poison oracle, for even if a wife repented of her infidelity and told her husband the name of her lover he might deny the accusation. The husband might, it is true, urge before the prince some other grounds for suspicion, but he would base his charge of adultery mainly upon the evidence of the oracle, and no further proof than this was required. The accused man would defend himself less by urging absence of circumstantial evidence than by offering to give a *ngbu* or test. He was asked to choose a man of substance among the regular attendants at court and to give him the test, telling him to place the question of adultery before his oracle. This man acted on behalf of his prince and the declaration of his oracle settled the case. To Zande eyes this is the perfect procedure in adultery cases and they do not approve of European methods, for in their opinion the only sure evidence of guilt or innocence is not allowed.

Accusing husbands and men accused share this opinion, the husbands because they often cannot produce evidence acceptable to government courts of adulteries for which they possess conclusive proof in the declaration of the poison oracle; accused persons, because they are condemned on the declaration of a woman without appeal to the one really reliable authority, the poison oracle.

Special care is taken to protect a prince's oracle poison from witchcraft and pollution because a prince's oracles reveal matters of tribal importance, judge criminal and civil cases, and determine whether vengeance has been exacted for death. A prince has two or three official operators who supervise his poison oracle. These men must be thoroughly reliable since the fate of their master and the purity of law are in their hands. If they break a taboo the whole legal system may become

corrupted and the innocent be judged guilty and the guilty be judged innocent. An official consulter of a prince's oracles must also be a man of impeccable honesty since he is given sole charge of many legal cases and tests of vengeance. He can ruin subjects of his master by fabricating oracular statements. Finally, the consulter of a prince's oracle must know how to maintain silence about his master's affairs. There is no offence more serious in the eyes of a Zande prince than 'revealing the speech of the king's poison oracle'.

We who do not believe in the poison oracle think that the courts we have established are just because they recognize only evidence which we regard as such, and we flatter ourselves that they are native courts of justice because we allow natives to preside over them. But Azande think that they do not admit the only evidence which is really relevant to the cases which come before them, and the princes who have to administer justice do so with mechanical application of imported European rules of procedure, and without conviction, since the rules are not according to custom.

v

I never found great difficulty in observing oracle consultations. I found that in such matters the best way of gaining confidence was to enact the same procedure as Azande and to take oracular verdicts as seriously as they take them. I always kept a supply of poison for the use of my household and neighbours and we regulated our affairs in accordance with the oracles' decisions. I may remark that I found this as satisfactory a way of running my home and affairs as any other I know of. Among Azande it is the only satisfactory way of life because it is the only way of life they understand, and it furnishes the only arguments by which they are wholly convinced and silenced. Friends and neighbours would from time to time ask me to let them bring fowls to consult my oracles about their troubles. I was always pleased at this sign of their trust. Also, I had opportunity on a number of occasions to observe other people's oracles at work. In the course of many months I made repeated observations of oracular consultations and had ample opportunity to acquaint myself with details of technique and interpretation. An investigation into the use of the poison oracle, like an investi-

gation into beliefs about witchcraft, does not require special informants. I could rely upon direct observation and could elicit commentary from any adult Zande when a point was not wholly clear to me. I can say the same about the rubbing-board oracle and, to a lesser degree, of the termites oracle.

For information on the following points, however, I had to rely mainly, or entirely, on verbal information: the process of collecting oracle poison; the administration of poison to human beings; and the use of the poison oracle in judicial procedure at the king's court. Poison is not administered to human beings at the present time. The poison oracle has no longer a primary role in court procedure, though it is still to some extent employed. It had been my ambition to observe oracle poison being gathered and I made an expedition into the Belgian Congo with this end in view but was defeated by combined dysentery and malaria, and was carried home again in extreme weakness.

vi

The usual place for a consultation is on the edge of cultivations far removed from homesteads. Any place in the bush screened by high grasses and brushwood is suitable. Or they may choose the corner of a clearing at the edge of the bush where crops will later be sown, since this is not so damp as in the bush itself. The object in going so far is to ensure secrecy, to avoid pollution by people who have not observed the taboos, and to escape witchcraft which is less likely to corrupt the oracle in the bush than in a homestead.

One does not consult the poison oracle during the heat of the day since strong sunlight is bad both for the poison and for the chickens. If the oracle is consulted late in the morning the basket of chickens is placed in the shade of a nearby shrub or covered with grass. When the poison has been for some time in strong sunlight it becomes very potent and they say then that, 'If a man gives one dose to a small fowl he has given it quite enough.' The normal time for consultations is from about eight to nine o'clock in the morning, because by this time the dew has evaporated and it is possible to sit down in the bush without great discomfort. Very occasionally elders who frequently consult the oracles and conduct long seances hold them at night.

The consultation may then take place in the centre of the homestead after the womenfolk have retired to bed. Consultations may take place on any day except the day after a new moon.

Oracle poison is useless unless a man possesses fowls upon which to test it, for the oracle speaks through fowls. In every Zande household there is a fowl-house, and fowls are kept mainly with the object of subjecting them to oracular tests. As a rule they are only killed for food (and then only cocks or old hens) when an important visitor comes to the homestead, perhaps a prince's son or perhaps a father-in-law. Eggs are not eaten but are left to hens to hatch out. Clay receptacles may be fashioned or baskets placed in one of the huts to encourage hens to nest in them, but often they lay their eggs in the bush and if they are fortunate will one day strut back to the homestead accompanied by their broods. Generally a Zande, unless he is a wealthy man, will not possess more than half a dozen grown fowls at the most, and many people possess none at all or perhaps a single hen which someone has given to them.

Small chickens, only two or three days old, may be used for the poison oracle, but Azande prefer them older. However, one sees fowls of all sizes at oracle consultations, from tiny chickens to half-grown cockerels and pullets. When it is possible to tell the sex of fowls Azande use only cockerels, unless they have none and a consultation is necessary at once. The hens are spared for breeding purposes. Generally a man tells one of his younger sons to catch the fowls the night before a seance. Otherwise they catch them when the door of the fowl-house is opened shortly after sunrise, but it is better to catch them and put them in a basket at night when they are roosting. For if the fowls elude capture in the morning and run away into nearby gardens it is much trouble to catch them. Two or three boys have to run them down, all the womenfolk know what is going on, the neighbours hear the noise, and a witch among them may follow the owner of the fowls to prevent the oracle from giving him the information he desires. When chickens are used this difficulty does not arise because they sleep in one of the huts, where they are immune from attacks by wild cats, and they are easily caught on the morning of a seance.

Old men say that fully grown birds ought not to be used in

oracle consultations because they are too susceptible to the poison and have a habit of dying straight away before the poison has had time to consider the matter placed before it or even to hear a full statement of the problem. On the other hand, a chicken remains for a long time under the influence of the poison before it recovers or expires, so that the oracle has time to hear all the relevant details concerning the problem placed before it and to give a well-considered judgement.

VII

Any male may take part in the proceedings. However, the oracle is costly, and the questions put to it concern adult occupations. Therefore boys are only present when they operate the oracle. Normally these are boys who are observing taboos of mourning for the death of a relative. Adults also consider that it would be very unwise to allow any boys other than these to come near their poison because boys cannot be relied upon to observe the taboos on meats and vegetables.

An unmarried man will seldom be present at a seance. If he has any problems his father or uncle can act on his behalf. Moreover, only a married householder is wealthy enough to possess fowls and to acquire poison and has the experience to conduct a seance properly. Senior men also say that youths are generally engaged in some illicit love affair and would probably pollute the poison if they came near it.

It is particularly the province of married men with households of their own to consult the poison oracle and no occupation gives them greater pleasure. It is not merely that they are able to solve their personal problems; but also they are dealing with matters of public importance, witchcraft, sorcery, and adultery, in which their names will be associated as witnesses of the oracle's decisions. A middle-aged Zande is happy when he has some poison and a few fowls and the company of one or two trusted friends of his own age, and he can sit down to a long seance to discover all about the infidelities of his wives, his health and the health of his children, his marriage plans, his hunting and agricultural prospects, the advisability of changing his homestead, and so forth.

Poor men who do not possess poison or fowls but who are compelled for one reason or another to consult the oracle will

persuade a kinsman, blood-brother, relative-in-law, or prince's deputy to consult it on their behalf. This is one of the main duties of social relationships.

Control over the poison oracle by the older men gives them great power over their juniors and is one of the main sources of their prestige. It is possible for the older men to place the names of the youths before the poison oracle and on its declarations to bring accusations of adultery against them. Moreover, a man who is not able to afford poison is not a fully independent householder, since he is unable to initiate any important undertaking and is dependent on the goodwill of others to inform him about everything that concerns his health and welfare.

Women are debarred not only from operating the poison oracle but from having anything to do with it. They are not expected even to speak of it, and a man who mentions the oracle in the presence of women uses some circumlocutory expression. When a man is going to consult the poison oracle he says to his wife that he is going to look at his cultivations or makes a similar excuse. She understands well enough what he is going to do but says nothing. Occasionally very old women of good social position have been known to operate the poison oracle, or at least to consult it, but such persons are rare exceptions and are always august persons.

The poison oracle is a male prerogative and is one of the principal mechanisms of male control and an expression of sex antagonism. For men say that women are capable of any deceit to defy a husband and please a lover, but men at least have the advantage that their oracle poison will reveal secret embraces. If it were not for the oracle it would be of little use to pay bride-wealth, for the most jealous watch will not prevent a woman from committing adultery if she has a mind to do so. And what woman has not? The only thing which women fear is the poison oracle; for if they can escape the eyes of men they cannot escape the eyes of the oracle. Hence it is said that women hate the oracle, and that if a woman finds some of the poison in the bush she will destroy its power by urinating on it. I once asked a Zande why he so carefully collected the leaves used in operating the oracle and threw them some distance away into the bush, and he replied that it was to prevent women from finding them and polluting them, for if they pollute the leaves then the poison

which has been removed to its hiding-place will lose its power.

When we consider to what extent social life is regulated by the poison oracle we shall at once appreciate how great an advantage men have over women in their ability to use it, and how being cut off from the main means of establishing contact with the mystical forces that so deeply affect human welfare degrades woman's position in Zande society.

Great experience is necessary to conduct a seance in the correct manner and to know how to interpret the findings of the oracle. One must know how many doses of poison to administer, whether the oracle is working properly, in what order to take the questions, whether to put them in a positive or negative form, how long a fowl is to be held between the toes or in the hand while a question is being put to the oracle, when it ought to be jerked to stir up the poison, and when it is time to throw it on the ground for final inspection. One must know how to observe not only whether the fowl lives or dies, but also the exact manner in which the poison affects it, for while it is under the influence of the oracle its every movement is significant to the experienced eye. Also one must know the phraseology of address in order to put questions clearly to the oracle without error or ambiguity, and this is no easy task when a single question may be asked in a harangue lasting as long as five or ten minutes. Not every man is proficient in the art, though most adults can prepare and question the oracle if necessary. Those who as boys have often prepared the poison for their fathers and uncles, and who are members of families which frequent the court and constantly consult the oracle, are the most competent. Some men are very expert at questioning the oracle, and those who wish to consult it like to be accompanied by such a man.

VIII

Any man who is invited by the owner of the oracle poison may attend the seance, but he will be expected to keep clear of the oracle if he has had relations with his wife or eaten any of the prohibited foods within the last few days. It is imperative that the man who actually prepares the poison shall have observed these taboos, and for this reason the owner of the poison, referred to in this account as the owner, generally asks a boy

or man who is under taboos of mourning to operate the oracle, since there can be no doubt that he has kept the taboos, because they are the same for mourning as for oracles. Such a man is always employed when, as in a case of sudden sickness, it is necessary to consult the oracle without warning so that there is no time for a man to prepare himself by observation of taboos. I shall refer to the man or boy who actually prepares the poison and administers it to fowls as the operator. When I speak of the questioner I refer to the man who sits opposite to the oracle and addresses it and calls upon it for judgements. As he sits a few feet from the oracle he ought also to have observed all the taboos. It is possible for a man to be owner, operator, and questioner at the same time by conducting the consultation of the oracle by himself, but this rarely, if ever, occurs. Usually there is no difficulty in obtaining the services of an operator since a man knows which of his neighbours are observing the taboos associated with death and vengeance. One of his companions who has not eaten tabooed food or had sexual relations with women for a day or two before the consultation acts as questioner. If a man is unclean he can address the oracle from a distance. It is better to take these precautions because contact of an unclean person with the oracle is certain to destroy its potency, and even the close proximity of an unclean person may have this result.

The taboos which have invariably to be kept by persons who come into contact with oracle poison are on:

Sexual relations with women.

Eating elephant's flesh.

Eating fish.

Eating *mboyo* vegetable (*Hibiscus esculentus*).

Eating *morombida* vegetable (*Corchorus tridens*).

Smoking hemp.

Some men avoid eating animals of a light colour, and such would seem to be the rule imposed on those who come into contact with a prince's oracles. Elephant's flesh and fish are forbidden on account of the powerful smell emitted by a man who has eaten them. I think that it is their slimy nature that has brought *mboyo* and *morombida* under a ritual ban. They are glutinous, and when the edible parts are plucked they do not break off cleanly but are attached to the stem by glutinous fibres

which have to be drawn out. When cooked they form a sticky mess which can be stretched like toffee. Before he comes into contact with oracle poison, or even into close proximity to it, a man ought to have refrained from sexual intercourse for five or six days and to have abstained from the forbidden meats and vegetables for three or four days. However, the length of time during which a man ought to observe these taboos prior to operating the oracle is not fixed, and different men give different estimates. Many are content to refrain from sexual intercourse for five or even four days. If a man who has had sexual relations is asked to operate the oracle he will say, 'I have eaten *mboyo*,' and everyone will understand that he is employing a euphemism for sexual intercourse. He may excuse himself in similar terms if he simply does not wish to be bothered with the work.

The owner does not pay the operator and questioner for their services. The questioner is almost invariably either the owner himself or one of his friends who also wishes to put questions to the oracle and has brought fowls with him for the purpose. It is usual to reward the operator, if he is an adult, by giving him a fowl during the seance so that he can place one of his own problems before the oracle. Since he is generally a man who wears a girdle of mourning and vengeance he will often ask the oracle when the vengeance-magic is going to strike its victim.

To guard against pollution a man generally hides his poison in the thatched roof of a hut, on the inner side, if possible, in a hut which women do not use, but this is not essential, for a woman does not know that there is poison hidden in the roof and is unlikely to come into contact with it. The owner of the poison must have kept the taboos if he wishes to take it down from the roof himself, and if he is unclean he will bring the man or boy who is to operate the oracle into the hut and indicate to him at a distance where the poison is hidden in the thatch. So good a hiding-place is the thatched roof of a hut for a small packet of poison that it is often difficult for its owner himself to find it. No one may smoke hemp in a hut which lodges oracle poison. However, there is always a danger of pollution and of witchcraft if the poison is kept in a homestead, and some men prefer to hide it in a hole in a tree in the bush, or even to build a small shelter and to lay it on the ground beneath.

This shelter is far removed from human dwellings, and were a man to come across it in the bush he would not disturb it lest it cover some kind of lethal medicine. It is very improbable that witchcraft will discover oracle poison hidden in the bush. I have never seen oracle poison under a shelter in the bush, but I was told that it is frequently housed in this manner.

Oracle poison when not in use is kept wrapped in leaves, and at the end of a seance used poison is placed in a separate leaf-wrapping to unused poison. The poison may be used two or three times and sometimes fresh poison is added to it to make it more potent. When its action shows that it has lost its strength they throw it away.

All good oracle poison is the same, whoever owns, operates, and consults it. But its goodness depends on the care and virtue of owner, operator, and consulter. As the greatest precautions are taken with a prince's poison, it is considered more reliable than the poison of commoners. All *benge* is the same material, but people speak of 'my *benge*' or of 'so-and-so's *benge*', and they say that the poison of one prince is absolutely reliable while that of another prince is not so reliable. They make these judgments partly on the evidence of subsequent events which prove oracles right or wrong in their statements, and partly on the verdicts of the king's oracle, which is the final authority. For in the past cases would occasionally go from a provincial governor's oracles to Gbudwe's oracle which might declare them to be in error.

IX

I will now describe the manner in which poison is administered to fowls. The operator goes ahead of the rest of the party in order to prepare for the test. He takes with him a small gourdful of water. He clears a space by treading down the grasses. Afterwards he scrapes a hole in the earth into which he places a large leaf as a basin for the oracle poison. From *bingba* grass he fashions a small brush to administer the poison, and from leaves he makes a filter to pour the liquid poison into the beaks of the fowls; and from other leaves he makes a cup to transfer water from the gourd to the poison when it needs to be moistened. Finally, he tears off some branches of nearby shrubs and extracts their bast to be used as cord for attaching

to the legs of fowls which have survived the test so that they can be easily retrieved from the grass when the business of the day is finished. The operator does not moisten the poison till the rest of the party arrive.

There may be only one man or there may be several who have questions to put to the oracle. Each brings his fowls with him in an open-wove basket. As it has been agreed beforehand where the oracle consultation is to take place they know where to foregather. As each person arrives he hands over his basket of fowls to the operator who places it on the ground near him. A man who is used to acting as questioner sits opposite to it, a few feet away if he has observed the taboos, but several yards away if he has not observed them. Other men who have not kept the taboos remain at a greater distance.

When everyone is seated they discuss in low tones whose fowl they will take first and how the question shall be framed. Meanwhile the operator pours some water from the gourd at his side into his leaf cup and from the cup on to the poison, which then effervesces. He mixes the poison and water with his finger-tips into a paste of the right consistency and, when instructed by the questioner, takes one of the fowls and draws down its wings over its legs and pins them between and under his toes. He takes his grass brush, twirls it round in the poison, and folds it in the leaf filter. He holds open the beak of the fowl and tips the end of the filter into it and squeezes the filter so that the liquid runs out of the paste into the throat of the fowl. He bobs the head of the fowl up and down to compel it to swallow the poison.

At this point the questioner, having previously been instructed by the owner of the fowl on the facts which he is to put before the oracle, commences to address the poison inside the fowl. He continues to address it for about a couple of minutes, when a second dose of poison is usually administered. If it is a very small chicken two doses will suffice, but a larger fowl will receive three doses, and I have known a fowl receive a fourth dose, but never more than four. The questioner does not cease his address to the oracle, but puts his questions again and again in different forms, though always with the same refrain, 'If such is the case, poison oracle kill the fowl,' or 'If such is the case, poison oracle spare the fowl.' From time to time he interrupts his flow of oratory to give a technical order

to the operator. He may tell him to give the fowl another dose of poison or to jerk it between his toes by raising and lowering his foot (this stirs up the poison inside the fowl). When the last dose of poison has been administered and he has further addressed it, he tells the operator to raise the fowl. The operator takes it in his hand and, holding its legs between his fingers so that it faces him, gives it an occasional jerk backwards and forwards. The questioner redoubles his oratory as though the verdict depended upon his forensic efforts, and if the fowl is not already dead he then, after a further bout of oratory, tells the operator to put it on the ground. He continues to address the poison inside the fowl while they watch its movements on the ground.

The poison affects fowls in many ways. Occasionally it kills them immediately after the first dose, while they are still on the ground. This seldom happens, for normally a fowl is not seriously affected till it is removed from the ground and jerked backwards and forwards in the hand. Then, if it is going to die, it goes through spasmodic stretchings of the body and closing of the wings and vomits. After several such spasms it vomits and expires in a final seizure. Some fowls appear quite unaffected by the poison, and when, after being jerked backwards and forwards for a while, they are flung to the ground peck about unconcernedly. Those fowls which are unaffected by the poison generally excrete as soon as they are put to earth. Some fowls appear little affected by the poison till put to earth, when they suddenly collapse and die. It is very seldom that a fowl seriously affected by the poison finally recovers.

One generally knows what the verdict is going to be after the fowl has been held in the hand for a couple of minutes. If it appears certain to recover the operator ties bast to its leg and throws it to the ground. If it appears certain to die he does not trouble to tie bast to its leg, but lays it on the earth to die. Often when a fowl has died they draw its corpse in a semicircle round the poison to show it to the poison. They then cut off a wing to use as evidence and cover the body with grass. Those fowls which survive are taken home and let loose. A fowl is never used twice on the same day.

There is no stereotyped speech—no formula—in which the oracle must be addressed. Nevertheless, there are traditional

refrains, pieces of imagery, compliments to the oracle, ways of formulating a question, and so forth which occur in every consultation.

The main duty of the questioner is to see that the oracle fully understands the question put to it and is acquainted with all facts relevant to the problem it is asked to solve. They address it with all the care for detail that one observes in court cases before a prince. This means beginning a long way back and noting over a considerable period of time every detail which might elucidate the case, linking up facts into a consistent picture of events, and the marshalling of arguments into a logical and closely knit web of sequences and interrelations of fact and inference. Also the questioner is careful to mention to the oracle again and again the name of the man who is consulting it, and he points him out to the oracle with his outstretched arm. He mentions also the name of his father, perhaps the name of his clan, and the name of the place where he resides, and he gives similar details of other people mentioned in the address.

An address consists usually of alternate directions. The first sentences outline the question in terms demanding an affirmative answer and end with the command, 'Poison oracle kill the fowl.' The next sentences outline the question in terms demanding a negative answer and end with the command, 'Poison oracle spare the fowl.' The consulter then takes up the question again in terms asking an affirmative answer; and so on. If a bystander considers that a relevant point has been left out he interrupts the questioner, who then makes this point.

The questioner has a switch in his hand, and while questioning the oracle beats the ground, as he sits cross-legged, in front of it. He continues to beat the ground till the end of his address. Often he will gesticulate as he makes his points, in the same manner as a man making a case in court. He sometimes plucks grass and shows it to the poison and, after explaining that there is something he does not wish it to consider, throws it behind him. Thus he tells the oracle that he does not wish it to consider the question of witchcraft but only of sorcery. Witchcraft is *wingi*, something irrelevant, and he casts it behind him. The imagery used is specially noteworthy. It is seldom that the oracle is addressed without analogies and circumlocutions.

Thus in asking whether a man has committed adultery one frames the question in some such manner as follows:

Poison oracle, poison oracle, you are in the throat of the fowl. That man his navel joined her navel; they pressed together; he knew her as woman and she knew him as man. She has drawn *badiabe* (a leaf used as a towel) and water to his side (for ablutions after intercourse); poison oracle hear it, kill the fowl.

While the fowl is undergoing its ordeal men are attentive to their behaviour. A man must tighten and spread out his bark-cloth loin-covering lest he expose his genitals, as when he is sitting in the presence of a prince or parent-in-law. Men speak in a low voice as they do in the presence of superiors. Indeed, all conversation is avoided unless it directly concerns the procedure of consultation. If anyone desires to leave before the proceedings are finished he takes a leaf and spits on it and places it where he has been sitting. I have seen a man who rose for a few moments only to catch a fowl which had escaped from its basket place a blade of grass on the stone upon which he had been sitting. Spears must be laid on the ground and not planted upright in the presence of the poison oracle. Azande are very serious during a seance, for they are asking questions of vital importance to their lives and happiness.

X

Basically, the system of question and answer in oracle consultations is simple. There are two tests, the *bambata sima*, or first test, and the *gingo*, or second test. If a fowl dies in the first test then another fowl must survive the second test, and if a fowl survives the first test another fowl must die in the second test for the judgement to be accepted as valid. Generally the question is so framed that the oracle will have to kill a fowl in the first test and spare another fowl in the corroborative test to give an affirmative reply, and to spare a fowl in the first test and kill another fowl in the corroborative test to give a negative reply; but this is not invariably the case, and questions are sometimes framed in an opposite manner. The killing of a fowl does not give in itself a positive or negative answer. That depends upon the form of the question. I will illustrate the usual procedure by an example:

A.

First Test. If X has committed adultery poison oracle kill the fowl.

If X is innocent poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl dies.

Second Test. The poison oracle has declared X guilty of adultery by slaying the fowl. If its declaration is true let it spare this second fowl. The fowl survives.

Result. A valid verdict. X is guilty.

B.

First Test. If X has committed adultery poison oracle kill the fowl.

If X is innocent poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl lives.

Second Test. The poison oracle has declared X innocent of adultery by sparing the fowl. If its declaration is true let it slay the second fowl. The fowl dies.

Result. A valid verdict. X is innocent.

C.

First Test. If X has committed adultery poison oracle kill the fowl.

If X is innocent poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl dies.

Second Test. The poison oracle has declared X guilty of adultery by slaying the fowl. If its declaration is true let it spare the second fowl. The fowl dies.

Result. The verdict is contradictory and therefore invalid.

D.

First Test. If X has committed adultery poison oracle kill the fowl.

If X is innocent poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl survives.

Second Test. The poison oracle has declared X innocent of adultery by sparing the fowl. If its declaration is true let it slay the second fowl. The fowl survives.

Result. The verdict is contradictory and therefore invalid.

In the two tests one fowl must die and the other must live if the verdict is to be accepted as valid. If both live or both die the verdict is invalid and the oracle must be consulted on the matter a second time on another occasion. If the supply of oracle poison is sufficient the two tests may be made during the same seance, especially when the matter is important and urgent. Very often, however, a test is not completed at a single seance, as will be observed in the tables that follow, for one of these reasons:

(1) The other part of the test may have been carried out previously or may be carried out at a future seance. Sometimes

a long interval elapses between two tests because the first one is considered sufficient justification for commencing an undertaking, but a second test has to be made before the undertaking is far advanced, e.g. a man is betrothed to a girl and begins to pay bride-spears to her father on the authority of a single test and leaves the corroborative test till months later. But the girl will not come to live with him permanently till both tests have been made. (2) One of the lesser oracles may have been consulted earlier so that a single verdict of the poison oracle is therefore regarded as an oracular confirmation. (3) Often Azande consider a single test sufficient, especially if the oracle gives its answer decisively by killing the fowl without hesitation. They are able to economize their oracle poison by this means. (4) Many confirmations of verdicts are contained in the oracle's answers to other questions, e.g. a man asks whether a witch will die if a certain kinsman observes taboos of vengeance-magic. The oracle says 'Yes'. He then asks whether the kinsman will die during the period he is under taboos. If the oracle says 'No' it confirms its previous verdict because the life of the kinsman is bound up with the accomplishment of vengeance. (5) Sometimes a single fowl is used to confirm different questions. If in answer to two different questions the oracle killed two fowls it may then be asked to spare a third fowl to confirm both its verdicts at the same time. (6) When a serious matter is not at stake Azande are sometimes content merely to know that the oracle is functioning correctly, and being assured of this, are prepared to accept its single statements and to dispense with repetitions of judgement. Thus five unconnected questions may be asked in a seance. The oracle spares fowls in answer to the first four questions and then kills a fowl in answer to the fifth question. This shows that the action of the particular bundle of poison is discriminating and therefore its first four verdicts may be assumed to be valid.

But two tests are essential in any question that concerns the relations between two persons, especially when they involve legal issues.

XI

The following consultations of the poison oracle are given to show the type of questions asked and the order of asking, and

to enable the reader to judge for himself the proportion of fowls that die, the number of doses of poison they receive, and the order of deaths and survivals. I was present at both the seances recorded, and many of the questions concern persons connected with my household and their relatives.

SEANCE I

- (1) Should X take on the taboos of mourning and vengeance for the death of Magadi till vengeance be accomplished? The fowl **DIES**, giving the answer 'Yes'.
- (2) If X takes on the taboos of mourning for Magadi will he die in consequence (i.e. if, through carelessness in its use, the magical medicine he has sent out against Magadi's murderer should turn back upon X himself? This would also be a corroboration of the first question, since if X were to die then vengeance would not be accomplished during his period of mourning.) The fowl **DIES**, giving the answer 'Yes'. (These two verdicts contradicted one another and a short discussion followed. One man present said that since Magadi died of leprosy his death ought not to be avenged, and that for this reason the oracle had given contradictory verdicts. This opinion was rejected by others.)
- (3) If Adiyambio, who is suffering from a deep-seated ulcer, remains in our government settlement, will he die? The fowl **SURVIVES**, giving the answer 'No'.
- (4) If Bamina lives in the new homestead which he has just built for himself will he die? The fowl **DIES**, giving the answer 'Yes'.
- (5) If Bamina remains in his old homestead will he die? The fowl **DIES**, giving the answer 'Yes'.
- (6) If Bamina goes to live in the government settlement of Ndoruma will he die? The fowl **SURVIVES**, giving the answer 'No'.
- (7) (Corroboration of the last question.) Did the oracle speak truly when it said that Bamina would not die if he went to live in the government settlement of Ndoruma? The fowl **SURVIVES**, giving the answer 'No'. (The answers to questions 6 and 7 therefore contradicted one another. Someone suggested that the oracle was tired like a chief who has been sitting for hours listening to cases in his court and is weary. Another man said that the oracle saw some misfortune ahead, which was not death yet was a serious misfortune, and had taken this way of warning Bamina. In any case, the verdicts taken together were considered a bad augury and there was a short discussion about who was threatening the welfare of Bamina. Mbira gave it as his opinion that the danger

was from sorcery and not from witchcraft since witchcraft does not pursue a man from one place to another in this manner but ceases to trouble him if he leaves his homestead and goes to live elsewhere.)

- (8) They now ask the oracle about two men, one called Pilipili and the other a man of the Bangombi clan who had once married Bamina's daughter but whose bride-spears had been returned to him. Are either of these two men threatening Bamina with witchcraft or with bad magic? The fowl *DIES*, giving the answer 'Yes'.

The seance had to be closed at this point as there was not enough poison left to continue consultations.

SEANCE II

- (1) Since by an earlier consultation it has been determined that the daughter of Mamenzi, the wife of Mekana, is in a bad 'condition', is the evil influence that hangs over her from the homestead of Mekana or from the homestead of her paternal grandfather (who had been given her bride-spears by her father as 'first-fruits')? If it is from Mekana's homestead, poison oracle spare the fowl. If it is from her grandfather's homestead, poison oracle kill the fowl. (It may be remarked that this is a very unusual way of putting a question to the oracle since it does not allow for a third alternative: that the witch is a member of some household other than the two mentioned. The procedure might even be regarded as incorrect. However, the husband was so certain that the evil influence which threatened his wife could only have arisen from jealousy in his own household, or from displeasure in the household of his parents-in-law, that the question appeared to him legitimate. Moreover, it was always possible for the oracle to show that neither household was responsible by killing or sparing both fowls in the double test, or even by the way in which it affected the fowls during the tests.) The fowl *DIES*, saying that the evil influence is from the homestead of the girl's grandfather. (One dose of the poison was administered.)
- (2) The rubbing-board oracle has said that a man named Sueyo made the magic which caused Kisanga such violent sickness. The question is now asked, 'Is the statement of the rubbing-board correct? If so, poison oracle kill the fowl!' The fowl *SURVIVES*, giving the answer 'No'. (Two doses administered.)
- (3) X's mother lies seriously ill. Is her sickness due to Basa? If so, poison oracle kill the fowl. If Basa is not responsible, poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl *SURVIVES*, giving the answer 'No'. (Two doses administered.)

- (4) (Corroborative verdict to question No. (1).) If the evil influence that threatens his wife is due to Mekana's household, then poison oracle kill the fowl. If the evil influence emanates from the wives of his wife's grandfather, then poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl *SURVIVES*, confirming that evil influence is from the homestead of the girl's grandfather. (Two doses administered.) (Mekana afterwards approached his father-in-law so that the womenfolk of his household might all collect and blow out water in sign of goodwill. He did not venture to single out any particular 'mother-in-law'.)
- (5) Since the oracle (test No. (3)) said that the sickness of X's mother is not due to Basa, X now asks whether it is due to the wives of Y. If the wives of Y are responsible, poison oracle kill the fowl. The fowl *DIES*, giving the answer 'Yes'. (One dose administered.)
- (6) (We now return to question No. (2).) It having been determined that Sueyo was not responsible for Kisanga's sickness, he asks whether the sorcerer lives on our side of the new part of the government settlement? If he lives there, poison oracle kill the fowl. The fowl *SURVIVES*, giving the answer 'No'. (Two doses administered.) (This verdict, combined with three previous verdicts on the matter, proved that the sorcerer did not live anywhere in our settlement.)
- (7) (We return to the subject of Mekana's wife already dealt with in questions (1) and (4).) If there is anyone else besides the wives of his wife's grandfather who threatens her health, or if after the fowl's wing has been presented to them to blow water on to it they will still exercise an evil influence over her, then poison oracle kill the fowl. If, on the other hand, there is no one else to fear besides the wives of his wife's grandfather, and if they will blow out water on to the fowl's wing with sincerity and withdraw their evil influence, then poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl *SURVIVES*, indicating that there will be nothing more to fear. (Two doses administered.)
- (8) (We return to the question of X's mother already dealt with in tests Nos. (3) and (5).) It having been determined that the wives of Y are responsible for the sickness of his mother, X now asks whether they are alone responsible or whether Y himself has encouraged and assisted them in bewitching the old woman. If Y is guilty, then poison oracle kill the fowl. If Y is innocent, then poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl *DIES*, saying that Y is responsible. (One dose administered.)

This second seance provides an example of a wholly successful consultation of the oracle. I would call attention to the

manner in which an assortment of questions is arranged. There are three problems to be solved, and there are eight fowls by which to solve them. The questions concern the welfare of Mekana's wife, the health of a woman referred to as X's mother, and the identification of the sorcerer who has caused Kisanga such grievous sickness. When several persons have questions to put before the oracle one does not thrash out one problem and then turn to the next, but generally, as on this occasion, each person is allowed to ask a question in turn. In the second round each person tries to procure corroborative verdicts or asks subsidiary questions. If one man has more fowls than the others he is able to ask more questions, but he allows others to place their problems in between his queries. This is not simply a matter of courtesy but also rests on a notion that after a problem has been put to the oracle and it has given its answer it should be granted time to turn the matter over at leisure before it corroborates its first answer and gives a final verdict. The poison used at this seance was at once seen to be discriminating. It killed the first fowl and showed that it was not impotent because when *benge* is impotent all the fowls survive. It spared the second fowl, showing that it was not stupid, over-potent poison, for when it is such all the fowls die. It spared several other fowls, but at the finish killed the last fowl, showing that it maintained its potency. Azande look to these evidences in every test to establish that the poison is good.

XII

It remains to give an account of how human beings used to drink oracle poison in the old days. Some care is necessary in taking account of the Zande phrase *mo mbiri benge*, 'You drink oracle poison,' because this is a usual expression of a prince when he means no more than, 'You must submit your case to the poison oracle.' But in the past people sometimes, though very rarely, actually drank poison themselves. This might happen in two ways. A man accused of some serious offence might offer to drink poison after an oracular test with fowls had gone against him. Likewise, if a woman accused a man of having committed adultery with her he could demand that both he and the woman should drink poison.

Oracle poison was also occasionally administered to boy cap-

tives in important cases involving princes. The address was made in the same idiom as an address to fowls. The poison was mixed with water in a gourd. The boy, seated on the ground and wearing a girdle of *bingba* grass, drank the poison, and then the questioner shook hand-bells and addressed the poison inside him. When he had finished his address he rubbed the gourd on the boy's head and ordered him to rise. If the boy had reached the fowl's wing and returned with it they would again have addressed the poison within him and would then have told him to replace the fowl's wing. They would afterwards have uttered a third and final address and told the lad to fetch the wing again. The test would then have ended.

If the poison were going to kill a boy it would not kill him while he sat still on the ground, though he would suffer spasms of pain that would make him stretch his arms backwards, gasping for breath. When a boy fell to the ground efforts were made, with the king's consent, to revive him by administering a slimy mixture made from the *mboyo* plant, the *kpoyo* tree, and salt. This made him vomit the poison. Afterwards they carried him to a brook-side and laid him in the shade and poured cold water over his face.