

Chicane

Double-thinking and Divination amongst the Witch-doctors

Geoffrey Cornelius (2009)

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- 'Verity and the Question of Primary and Secondary Scholarship in Astrology' in Patrick Curry and Michael York (eds.) *Astrology and the Academy*, pp. 103 - 113 (Bristol: Cinnabar Books, 2004).
- 'Cardano Incognito: A Review of Antony Grafton "Cardano's Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer"' *Culture & Cosmos* 9, no. 1 (2005) pp. 99 - 111.
- 'From Primitive Mentality to *Haecceity*: the Unique Case in Astrology and Divination' in Patrick Curry and Angela Voss (eds.) *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays in Astrology and Divination*, pp. 227 – 254 (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007).

Within the specialist study of astrology, his principal writing is:

- *The Moment of Astrology: Origins in Divination*. Foreword by Patrick Curry. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994; revised edition Bournemouth: Wessex Astrologer, 2003).

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Double-thinking and Divination amongst the Witch-doctors

Geoffrey Cornelius

Most practices of the people we name as shamans, witch-doctors and medicine-men present our modern rational understanding with an impasse. The logic of much that is done defeats us, it is absurd and often disgusting. Treatments are offered that can have no empirical value, yet the simple primitives seem to believe in them. Primitive healing and divinatory practices are particularly obscure; yet there is in them something elusive and important that the educated modern should seek to accommodate if there is to be any hope of arriving at some understanding of non-modern and pre-scientific mind and the knowing of divination that is integral with it.

We readily acknowledge an implicit ambiguity in divination when this is treated as an apparently faulty mode of logic. Its trickiness is then interpreted as arising from its mere contingency, and the consequent instability and irregularity of its production. Most participants in its production are presumed not to properly understand these objective facts. Some diviners simply deceive themselves as well as their clients; others who do grasp the empirical facts are presumed to knowingly dissemble to overcome their deficiency. The choice is between divination as ignorance or stupidity and divination as cheating and lying.

Sociological interpretation overcomes this crude reduction by emphasising the socially cohesive role of divination in traditional cultures; this becomes a logically acceptable account for the function of divination beyond the individual interpretation of any diviner or client. However, the sociological imagination lacks the vantage point from it which might address the specific question of the mode of thought involved in the understanding of divination, its meaning for the participants themselves. I take as a point of reference the prescription of Jean-Pierre Vernant that we must seek to describe not only the sociological parameters of divination, but just as importantly 'divinatory intelligence', the distinctive intellectual process involved.¹ This hermeneutic move is required if we are to take into account the *intentionality* of the diviner who knowingly plays or colludes in the game of divination not as the charlatan, lying to cover his or her back, but as negotiator with the spirit-world, a mediator between concealed and revealed. The assumption of ignorance or the cynical reduction to charlatanry fail to

¹ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, trans. Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton 1991) p.303. His essay, originally produced in *Divination et Rationalité* (1975) marks a significant step in modern divination studies, in explicitly posing the question of the intellectual operation involved in divinatory interpretation.

account for the phenomenon to the extent that the primary goal of divination is resolution, truth-as-unconcealment, and everything that flows from the bounty of good fortune.

I suggest that a defining characteristic of the divinatory form is an artful play of semblances; as good a name as any for this elusive quality is the *chicane*. The inquiry takes its lead from the recognition that the seeming-so of semblance and dissemblance are determinative in securing success in divination for both practitioners and clients. What on the one hand appears as illusion manifests on the other as truth, and this is found to be a universal aspect of divination. This is as true for the 21st century astrologer or Tarot-reader as it is for the *sangoma* with his bones. Before this wide-ranging theoretical conclusion is arrived at, the present task is limited to establishing the viability of this interpretation for non-modern modes of divination, on the basis of ethnographic accounts of traditional African culture. We are fortunate that several pioneering studies in ethnography have coaxed into the light aspects of the phenomenon with a degree of clarity that has not been attained in comparable studies in our own culture. The classic work is that of E.E. Evans-Pritchard on the Azande; taking his perceptive observations of the witch-doctors as a starting-point, we discover that these remarkable individuals may have a great deal to teach us about divination and the *chicane* in all cultures, including our own.² Even here the subtle nature of the subject requires an indirect approach through witch-doctor healing, which complements their divination. It is in their healing practice that the *chicane* stands out unobscured, and I therefore examine this first.

Although the patient work of ethnographers has clarified the relevant phenomena, the original and ground-breaking observations of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl on primitive mentality and the *participation mystique* have been little developed with respect to divination. The related question of witch-doctor healing and magical performance has taken a step into modern debate with the theories of Michael Taussig. He argues for a compact between the patient and the 'humbuggery' of the practitioner, where 'the real skill of the practitioner lies not in skilled concealment but in the skilled revelation of skilled concealment.' Taussig's concern is however trickery and healing rather than trickery and divination, and while ramifications for 'divinatory intelligence' may be inferred from this discussion, they are not directly addressed.³

² Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937). Concerning 'witch-doctors', I use this term in this study (rather than the more acceptable shaman, sangoma etc.) in deference to Evans-Pritchard's own usage, to avoid clumsy references to his text. This is regarded as a demeaning naming by most modern anthropologists, in my view mistakenly since 'witch-doctor' is a straightforward description of one of their principal functions, certainly in Azande culture. The name also connects us with unhappy but directly relevant features of our own culture's past. The word *shaman* properly belongs to a distinct stream of Finno-Ugric culture, although that is not the basis of my reservation. My concern is the way in which it has been adopted, which tends to disguise and romanticise the issues. At stake is the fact that for a variety of reasons most modern anthropologists do not like the stark idea of 'witches' and cannot bring themselves to conceive the possibility of their reality - a reality that is taken for granted as self-evident in many traditional cultures.

³ Michael Taussig, 'Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: another theory of magic', in Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels (eds.), *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* (Stanford, 2003)

The chicane has implications for the study of hermeneutics extending beyond traditional culture and beyond the limits of divination. This becomes apparent when it is related to wider categories of symbolic interpretation and to 'double-thinking', a mode of shifting yet discriminating definitions and fluid associations. This mode underlies the possibility of the chicane; it appears in all human dealings beyond the simply literal, and it is difficult to envisage an analysis of, for instance, play, theatre, religion or psychotherapy that did not include double-thinking or an equivalent capacity. It is a stock-in-trade for politics.⁴ However, it is in the area of what we may broadly term the mystical, the magical and the paranormal, the realms of faerie, enchantment, and the sacred, that double-thinking is fully revealed as foundational.

Double-thinking and the chicane have parallels in related areas of interest, notably in the studies of alchemy, divination and synchronicity of C.G. Jung. Jung recognised the significance of Mercurius and the 'synchronicity trickster', carrying forward a Platonic metaphor from antiquity and the renaissance.⁵ Like Ficino mixing his pantheons, the alchemist's Hermes in the same breath is the astrologer's Mercury.⁶ Mercury is the traditional planet of astrology, alchemy, magic - and thieves.⁷ An evocative metaphor is the Greek goddess Metis, and in this respect Hermes-Metis present faces of the same phenomenon. Modern commentators have brought forward

pp. 272-306. His themes of semblance and viscerality amongst the witch-doctors deserve more consideration than I can offer here. Although there are significant parallels between Taussig's approach to masking-unmasking and my analysis of double-thinking, I take a different line of interpretation on several counts, not least because his study concerns magical healing and trickery rather than divination and trickery. This continues the habitual tendency for anthropology to conflate the categories, obscuring divination in the high drama of magic and distancing us from divination's more commonplace phenomena. Taussig appears to locate unmasking as skilled and intentional unconcealment of the witchdoctor's semblance, as in the quotation given and in his statement that 'power flows not from masking but from unmasking, which masks more than masking' [p. 273]. My focus is the unconcealment of the cultural real (the illness, the witch, the good fortune) achieved through the diviner's chicane.

⁴ Double-thinking serves both wisdom and lies, true statesmanship and fascism. Its negating potential is chillingly portrayed by George Orwell in *1984*.

⁵ Amongst extensive material in Jung, see his study 'The Spirit Mercurius' in *Alchemical Studies: Collected Works 13* trans. R.F.C. Hull (London, 1967): 'Mercurius, following the tradition of Hermes, is many-sided, changeable, and deceitful.' The trick that Mercurius played on Jung in the middle of his astrological experiment on synchronicity is described by Marie-Louise von Franz *On Divination and Synchronicity* (Toronto, 1980) p.238. See also Maggie Hyde *Jung and Astrology* (London, 1992) pp. 130, 196-205.

⁶ Ficino was a master of the method I have termed double-thinking, as in his essay on light and the Sun referred to here. This is 'allegorical and, to that extent, a mystical exercise of the wits'. Marsilio Ficino, 'De Sole - the Book of the Sun', trans. Angela Voss et. al. in Noel Cobb and Eva Loewe (eds.) *Sphinx* (London, 1975).

⁷ William Lilly, *Christian Astrology* (London, 1647) pp.77-8: 'he is author of subtilty, tricks, devices, perjury, &c'.

the essentially metic nature of divination, its cunning intelligence,⁸ and Patrick Curry has related Metis to Max Weber's theme of enchantment.⁹ Ethnographers have observed a similar characteristic relationship of divination and the trickster.¹⁰ These indications need to be kept in the foreground, against the ready assumption that they are 'only' analogies, as if there is 'in fact' some other more logically satisfying way of talking about divination.

It is therefore suggested that the fluid and unbound associative thinking underlying the chicane is integral to understanding divination, and that knowing diviners are to varying degrees aware of this. This phenomenon is especially apparent in the intermediate realm of interpretation that proceeds through a to-and-fro of negotiation, both in the mind of the diviner and in dialogue with a client.

Metaphors of the Chicane

The chicane is an unsettling notion for anyone, especially a 'believer', seeking a sympathetic reading of divination within a single definition of truth. The idea appears at first to belong to the sceptical inquirer, who at best might allow a sociological rendering of divination into means of social control and adaptation; as such it may fulfil certain social functions but it has no inherent epistemological bite, no truthfulness in-and-of-itself. For our sceptic, since naive belief is readily manipulated by knowing fraudsters, here is the common English usage of 'chicanery' as deception and trickery. Conversely, practitioners of divination expend much energy in assuring everyone that of course this sort of trickiness has nothing whatsoever to do with their particular corner of the universe. A curiosity of these stances is that they complement each other, the naive literalism of some believers mirrored by the reductionism of some theorists. This very polarity becomes a virtue when it lets the diviner pull concealed questions into the open like rabbits out of a hat. Chicane comes to signify both an element within symbolic and divinatory performance, and the game of interpretation for both insider and outsider concerning the mysterious phenomena involved.

'Chicanery' is found in literature as a term for pettifogging legal diversions, designed to deflect the course of justice to the advantage of one of the parties. Chicanes are also practical features in road construction, created for safety or alternatively to enhance racing circuits; here the term designates an artificial bend, intended to force

⁸ John Heaton, *Metis: Divination, Psychotherapy and Cunning Intelligence* (London, 1990); see p.11 for the relationship of Metis and Hermes.

⁹ Patrick Curry in Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture: Pulling Down the Moon* (Oxford, 2004) pp. 104-107.

¹⁰ Rosalind Shaw, 'Splitting Truths from Darkness: Epistemological Aspects of Temne Divination', in Philip M. Peek (ed.), *African Divination Systems* pp. 137-152 (Bloomington, 1991). Shaw sees the trickster myths of divination as a corrective to one-sided positivistic categories which she suggests are characteristic of interpretation in the tradition of Evans-Pritchard.

traffic into single file, or to slow it down. These usages may derive from military engineering: chicanes are false battlements or obstructions intended to deceive or hinder an advancing enemy. In all of these cases the semblance influences another party's behaviour; it redirects the intention of the other. It does not 'come from' the real, but is employed 'in order to' produce the real. The idea also has a naturalistic and non-dialogical usage in the 'baffle' (French *chicane*) found in fluid dynamics and in acoustics; in the latter case it diverts air and sound-flow in speakers. Although the semantic thread here becomes tenuous, it is retained in the image of diverting a movement away from its pre-determined natural course.¹¹

Many games involve feints and ploys, and for our purposes an illuminating thread of the metaphor comes from card games, where the term means 'void of trumps'.¹² Chicane is a complement to the *trump* which may override the highest ranking power of an ordinary suit and take the trick; this word in turn derives from *trionphe* or triumph; the art of the chicane dances with the power of the trump, for that is its goal, to rise from negation to triumph. In older conventions of Bridge and some forms of Whist, chicane is a term for a hand holding no cards in the trump suit. Here we find the connotation of the *empty hand*; the hand is void of trumps and therefore lacking all natural capacity, and high skill is required in bidding and playing to a successful conclusion. In partnership games of the Whist family, coded communication is required to confound the enemy and create a successful bid. The no-trump state is the unartful state of nature, the state before the game, where each suit is empty; the game begins with bidding, in the sequence bidding-bluffing-playing-tricking-taking. Consider also Poker's duplicitous *bluff*, which is a major part of the art of the game. Here by deception an empty hand may force out rivals and rake in the pot; alternatively a full hand is played as if empty, drawing an opponent into a trap.

Granny's Ring

Chicane depends on a capacity of associative and double-thinking. Its hallmarks are allegory, metonymy and metaphor, paradoxically compounding subtlety and concrete simplicity. It sometimes proceeds by simple and absurd assertion, at other times it moves by hint and innuendo. Its style as well as its significance for divination are exemplified in the following anecdote of Granny's Ring.

¹¹ Amongst minor usages I have come across the term in the slang of petty criminals as 'chic', meaning having no cash. A hustler starts with an empty hand and ends up in pocket. The French *chic* = elegant has a separate origin in German *schicken* = 'to outfit oneself', which is not without a certain semantic resonance.

¹² 'Chicane: a term from Bridge Whist referring to a hand that is void of trumps. It was scored the same as three honours. In Contract Bridge, the term is obsolete in its original sense, though it is occasionally used to describe a void suit, as "chicane in hearts".' See Ben Cohen and Rhoda Barrow (eds.), *The Bridge Player's Encyclopedia* (London, 1964) p. 63.

I have from time to time experimented with dowsing, which, as with many simple divinatory forms, has an erratic and unpredictable occasional capacity to yield useful results. I am not an especially effective dowser, so on one occasion when I sought an answer to diet problems I asked a thoughtful friend with more talent to help me dowse samples of food hidden by her from my view. The trial was repeated by my hiding the samples for her to dowse, asking the ring to indicate which foods were bad or good for me. Good foods were to be indicated by a strong clockwise circling of the ring; bad foods by a counterclockwise movement; indifferent foods by little or no movement.

For the experiment my friend used a gold ring on a thread; the ring was precious to her, having belonged to her long-departed grandmother, who I never knew. The experiment yielded mainly inconsistent results, but that is not what stuck in my mind. What stayed with me is our discussion of the principles involved, which succeeded in articulating the state of mind in which we both approached the divination. We agreed that by using her ring we were *asking Granny to help us*. This goes beyond even *asking the ring to show us*, but we were doing that, too. How can one 'ask' either an inanimate object or someone who is dead to do anything? Therefore from one point of view this is simply a figure of speech; but behind this figure it is a reasonable suggestion that this way of talking gives voice to an affect we acknowledge with that particular ring, and which we have invested in it. By evoking an imaginative and emotional element, the experiment becomes special and charged with significance, which in some way allows a subliminal knowledge to show itself, leading the operator to 'unconsciously' vibrate the thread and tweak the ring to give the right answer. Perhaps my body already knows what is good for it. Put this way, I have described a theory of amplification of subliminal knowledge through physiological responses. This type of explanation is often advanced as a possible 'scientific' theory of dowsing, and it might therefore explain any successes from this and similar experiments.

This seems to be a reasonable theory, yet it is not quite enough, because it does not capture the *sense and meaningfulness* that go with the experience. This 'sense' is difficult to describe, yet is obvious on reflection. It is about an open-handed stance to reality, an unarticulated *modus operandi* in the face of things. When we question this orientation, within a short stretch of investigation we run into paradox; but it is characteristic of this stance *not* to track back to initial premises or draw out resulting conclusions. It is a simple matter to expose the paradoxes. It does not take the skill of a lawyer to see that the logical conclusion of saying 'let granny help us' is to posit the survival after death of a discarnate entity of - or associated with - granny; this entity has furthermore maintained its or her wits sufficiently over the decades to be with us in the proximity of her ring, and to have the acumen with regard to diet - my diet - to know *how* to help. I do not, and did not at the time, see the need to push through to this particular logical conclusion, but neither did I seek to deny it. In any case there was no reason to suppose that granny, whether incarnate or discarnate, would have had much useful to say about my diet.

If I do not wish to be taken down the road of granny-survival, then there is a different possible interpretation, that we have adopted an animistic approach to

granny's ring. This suggests that we must be attributing some power to the ring itself, perhaps passed into it by granny in her lifetime. Then it is the ring that seems to have this wonderful capacity, imbued with some mysterious intelligent power. But for my part I am not sure that is what I think, either. I have therefore proceeded in defiance of known explanations, since in choosing to leave the matter open and undefined I have resisted the full implications of the several explanatory possibilities. This defiance is not obscurantism, however, but rather a *resistance to mutually exclusive logical conclusions*. I remain open to possibilities because each of these suggestions, both the normal 'reasonable' conclusion of subliminal amplification, and the two paranormal variants (granny-survival and animism), seem to me to have a shade of truth to them, and none of them offend my general orientation. Crucially, therefore, the act of dowsing, and likewise the possibility of moving on any act of a symbolic, ritual or divinatory nature, may occur and be effective without requiring worked out conclusions and without requiring that 'good reasons' are established to justify the act.

This means that in the act of dowsing, to the extent that I am thinking discursively about dowsing, then I am thinking in two or three contradictory ways. This certainly will not do for scientific experiments, but it is surely how human beings decide most things of importance, which, despite our declarations, are only inconsistently worked to their logical conclusions or founded in coherent rational principles. Logical principles are abstractions drawn from consideration of human being, not determinants of human being; where this is not well understood 'good reasons' all too readily become tyrannies of thought.

With the suggestion that one may think in two or three inconsistent ways about a thing, we come to the nub of the idea of knowing that can hold apparently inconsistent possibilities in one and the same act and intention. This is what I mean by 'double-thinking'. I have not come across much satisfactory thinking about double-thinking; we should however avoid the temptation, common in anthropology, of simply equating this phenomenon with Freud's 'primary process'. If we are to follow Freud it might be better described as a quite mindful partial-discursive, a play of secondary cognitive process that evokes affective and imaginative associations but is not bound by them. The discursive threads are lightly held, as in free-ranging conversation, and they are not grasped and rolled up tight towards their conclusions. The effect is to strip the event of any single over-riding explanation. This cedes the authority of the real to the event, the fact of the act.

A comment from Evans-Pritchard is relevant here. The Azande have a termite-oracle where they receive an answer depending on whether termites strip bare one or other (or both or neither) of two branches left overnight. The Azande understand that the termites can hear their question, but they might also address the trees from which the branches are taken. So does the oracle depend on the termites - or on the trees? What is their theory for how the oracle works? From the many conversations Evans-Pritchard records on related matters, it is obvious that the Azande would find it curious and even foolish to push this question very far.¹³ Evans-Pritchard says that it must be

¹³ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, p.353.

'the oracle as a whole' that is taken to provide an answer; this seems true enough, but we need to add that the Azande are very likely adopting the same light-touch double-thinking that has been discussed above, where either *no* explanation is needed, or depending on the circumstance several inconsistent explanations could be entertained at the same time, if so desired.

The Chicane and Primitive Mentality

We arrive here at a fruitful comparison with the theories of Lévy-Bruhl. In his terminology, this same phenomenon is characteristic of 'primitive mentality', which likewise eschews what we would term logical consistency when it comes to some of the most significant dealings in life. According to Lévy-Bruhl, this mode is predominant in the realm of the mystical and magical:

In our thought, the conditions of the possibility of experience are universally valid for every experience, past and to come; what does not satisfy them cannot have been real nor ever become so. In the primitive man's world-view the conditions of the possibility of experience such as we conceive them are valid only for ordinary experience; the mystical experience, the extraordinary experience is not subject to them.¹⁴

As sometimes occurs, Lévy-Bruhl's use of 'mystical' and 'extraordinary' makes his expression of ideas seem over-dramatic, especially since the Azande generally treat their oracles in a matter-of-fact way. However, his approach brings out a vital distinction, that when it comes to matters of 'medicine', witchcraft and oracles the Azande adopt this open and associative 'non-logical' mode of thinking, a mode which is neither practical nor necessary for everyday affairs.¹⁵ The background of the modern educated person puts him or her at a disadvantage, because centuries - if not millennia - of abstractive Western philosophy have steeped us in a logic of universal rational categories entirely at variance with such partial and non-concluded double-thinking. As Lévy-Bruhl observes, in contrast to the primitive 'we do not see another sense in which a story may be said to be true or not true; there are not two ways for an event, an act, a thing to be objectively real'.¹⁶ Perhaps the multiple knowing of the primitive real is the message of Granny's Ring.

The Witch-bone Chicane

Evans-Pritchard makes a cardinal observation of the functional relationship of witchcraft, magic and oracles amongst the Azande: 'the two functions of a witch-doctor

¹⁴ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*, tr. Peter Rivière (Oxford, 1975), p. 53.

¹⁵ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, p. 340: '...the main purpose of the oracle and its principal value to the Azande lie in its ability to reveal the play of mystical forces'.

¹⁶ Lévy-Bruhl p. 63.

are to divine and to extract objects of witchcraft from the bodies of the sick', and sickness is closely bound up with witchcraft, so that any significant illness is held to be a result of its action.¹⁷ This is a common pattern in African culture. The notion of *craft* could mislead us, since its action is an erratic and occasional outcome of ill-intention; in Evans-Pritchard's view, witches are not conscious agents even if their enemies claim they are.¹⁸ Except in very serious instances the 'witch' is usually forgiven as soon as the error is acknowledged and appropriate ritual and reparation is made. Amongst the Azande, the power manifesting in the witch is hereditary, and is effective without magical ritual. Where magical ritual is intentionally employed to harm others, this involves bad medicine and is in the distinct category of sorcery; this is a crime which is abhorred. The principal function of witch-doctor divination is to seek out the ill effects of witchcraft and sorcery and to determine the appropriate cure or response.

The witch-doctors come together in an informal but nevertheless tightly-knit association in their local area, with a shared understanding and practices known only to themselves. They have an extensive knowledge of herbs, which includes what the Westerner will term their empirical attributes as well as their magical functions. Their songs and dances are well known and enjoyed in the community, but their most important methods are a closely guarded secret.¹⁹ Leechcraft, the apparent extraction of objects from the bodies of patients, is one of these secrets. The practice is common to witch-doctors not just in Africa,²⁰ but in primitive culture world-wide. As in Azande culture, this practice rests on an understanding that although illnesses are literally embodied, they are nevertheless magical or psychic in origin. In this respect, they are treated in much the same way as other misfortunes befalling a person. The magical interpretation is the cultural norm, the rule rather than the exception, shared by the witch-doctor and the patient.

Before commencing treatment, the Azande witch-doctor privately cuts a small piece of material into a 'witch-bone', or witchcraft object. He hides it between his fingers or under a fingernail. A layman prepares a poultice, and into this the witch-doctor covertly inserts the witchcraft object before placing the poultice on the patient's body. A powerful medicine, *mbiro*, is rubbed across the mouth of the patient, and also into a cut in the affected part of the patient's body. The poultice is removed and examined. When the object is found the witch-doctor shows it to the onlookers and says 'Heu! Well I never! So that's the thing from which he was dying'.²¹ The same act is repeated;

¹⁷ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, pp. 235,257.

¹⁸ *ibid.* part I ch. VIII 'Are witches conscious agents?'

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 153: 'In spite of the methods of investigation I employed, my informants did not communicate their entire knowledge to me, even indirectly, and [it] suggests that there were other departments of their knowledge which they did not disclose'.

²⁰ *ibid.* p. 153. In Azande culture leechcraft is also sometimes practised by other healers, both men and women; Evans-Pritchard does not discuss the methods of these healers.

²¹ *ibid.* p. 235.

according to Evans-Pritchard's informant, Kamanga, 'a man who is good at cheating makes use of the same object about three times'. Some witch-doctors are highly skilled illusionists, comparable to modern stage magicians.²²

Amongst a portfolio of other tricks are simulating blood with the juice of red berries, and producing worms.²³ A related procedure is employed where sickness is determined to have occurred because a witch has stolen and hidden the *likikpwo*, a psychic agent belonging to a person. After dancing the dance of divination, its location will be discovered by the witch-doctor who produces a previously prepared dried rat-gut. This is thumped back into the body of the patient to effect the cure.²⁴

Evans-Pritchard gained unique access to these secrets, on account of his immersion in the culture, through the respect in which he appears to have been held, and through the fortuitous circumstance of rivalry between two leading practitioners together with the desire of Kamanga, his servant and informant, to become initiated by them.²⁵ Evans-Pritchard assisted with the necessary gifts to both Badobo, Kamanga's teacher, and to the formidable Bögwözu, a visiting witch-doctor from the Baka tribe. There seems to be no report of hostility to Kamanga or to Evans-Pritchard as a result of these researches, although it is significant that following the humiliating denouement recounted below, Bögwözu left the district.²⁶

Given Kamanga's known role as an informant, the witch-doctors held back from his full initiation. The frustrating stalemate lasted until Evans-Pritchard called out 'Badobo's chicanery and Bögwözu's bluff' in an exquisite counter-chicane.²⁷ One of his houseboys fell mildly ill, and Evans-Pritchard seized the opportunity to suggest that Kamanga should operate immediately, and if this turned out successfully then Bögwözu should receive his full payment for the completion of the training. The procedure necessitated the attendance of Bögwözu. While the trainee was making a cut on the boy's abdomen, Evans-Pritchard saw Bögwözu secrete a small piece of charcoal in the poultice. He intercepted the poultice, and pretending to casually comment on it, he felt for the hidden charcoal and removed it. Bögwözu may not have realised the trick that was being played. The charade continued with Kamanga disagreeably surprised not to find the object that he had from his previous supervised practice come to expect. Evans-Pritchard caught a glimpse of Bögwözu moving his hand over the ground, seeking another piece of charcoal to rescue the situation.²⁸ At this point he stopped the

²² Skill of the witch-doctors: see for instance Evans-Pritchard pp. 238-9.

²³ *ibid.* p. 236.

²⁴ *ibid.* pp. 237-8.

²⁵ *ibid.* pp. 152-3: 'when informants fall out, anthropologists come into their own'.

²⁶ *ibid.* p. 232.

²⁷ *ibid.* pp. 230-2

²⁸ *ibid.* p. 231.

proceedings and asked teacher and novice to go to a nearby hut where he challenged the deception. The imposture was admitted, Bögwözu was rewarded with part-payment of his fee, and went his way.

Any concern on Badobo's part about Evans-Pritchard's precipitate intervention appears to have been more than compensated by his relief at seeing the back of a dangerous rival. However, the effect on Kamanga was 'devastating', leaving him in serious doubt about continuing. He soon recovered his poise, and with no further reason for this particular secret to be kept from his European master, Kamanga was granted his initiation. He developed 'a marked degree of self-assurance' so that, like his colleagues, he was well able to rationalise the chicanery of the witch-doctors, and to explain it to Evans-Pritchard.²⁹ Here is Kamanga's description of what was taught to him about the leech chicane:

Witch-doctors treat a sick man and deceive him, saying that they have taken an object of witchcraft from his body... but, on the other hand, they have put medicine into the sick man's mouth and cut his skin at the part of the body where he is in pain and have rubbed their medicine across the cut... It is the medicine which really cures people... The people think that healing is brought about by the extraction of objects, and only witch-doctors know that it is the medicine which heals people.³⁰

Chicane and Embodiment

Why is such a deception necessary? We may speculate that this is because sickness embodies literal truth in a physical dimension that is out in the open, public and undeniable. In an empirical and material sense the witch-doctor must often fail in this embodied half of the work. People will continue to sicken and die, and everyone appreciates this fact of life and death. Despite the qualifiers and caveats that offer leeway, success is measured by health, or at least by amelioration, where failure is suffering. The spectacular ideal is for us to feel with our own bodies and see with our own eyes that we are healed, and for others around us to see this, too. Many truths may be symbolised in the body, its woes might be sociopathic, psychic and obscure, but those woes are manifest, so that when the patient says 'I am sick' the literal truth of the matter and the material facts of the case become one.

In this sense, the body does not brook interpretation, but it is exactly at this point that the chicane of the witch-doctor does its work, between seeming and being, matching the material 'given' of the illness with the material given of the witchcraft-object. The patient must perforce attend the material and physical given of the illness,

²⁹ *ibid.* pp. 231-2.

³⁰ *ibid.* pp. 235-6. We might speculate on the translation and moral nuance of the word 'deceive' for Kamanga, and we should be alert to the possibility that his response bends to the language and conceptualisation of Evans-Pritchard. Such bending to the ethnographer is a problematic issue for participant observation in an alien culture, since it is inherently unlikely that the European will think like the native. However, this subtle consideration does not seem to me to be of an order that would materially affect the present discussion.

since this is what the pain and discomfort of disease demand of our consciousness. By contrast the witch-doctor works on a double level, carrying over material illness to a material symbol - the witchcraft object - which becomes both the carrier and the representative of the non-material psychic matrix of the illness. There is a dialogical process at work between actor and acted-upon, but different requirements of conscious intention between them, since the witch-doctor knows what the patient thinks, but also knows what the patient *needs*. This presents us with a double mode of interpretation for one and the same act. The patient thinks the illness is *caused by* the object, and its removal removes the illness. The witch-doctor treats the object and its removal as *semblance*, since for him its literal removal does not literally remove the illness, but - crucially - since the removal symbolises the healing, by the chicane of the whole performance he *effects* the healing. This is a good place to return to the card-playing metaphor with which we started, for witch-doctor and patient are playing this game together. The witch-doctor's trump, his manifest triumph, is the removal of the psycho-spiritual complex, the witchcraft that he and his patient agree is the source of illness. Through chicane the witch-doctor trumps the illness. The trick is played in the sleight-of-hand, and the trick that is taken is at the self-same moment the healing of the patient. This is the instance of empirical healing; honours go to the witch-doctor who performs this feat.

Symbolic Instantiation

In considering how the witch-doctor achieves his healing effect, our ordinary naturalistic and positivist concept of cause and effect may let us down, since there are overlapping and double-thinking senses in which the idea of causality is employed in the compact between witch-doctor and patient. Perhaps we need a more subtle and extended analysis to handle the interpretive moves involved, and Aristotle's approach, foundational for pre-enlightenment philosophy, provides a convincing hermeneutic strategy. For the most literal of possible interpretations by a patient, the witchcraft-object is both the *matter* (the material substance) and the *efficient cause* (the active agent) of the sickness. For the witch-doctor, the same object is not in-and-of-itself either the material or the efficient cause, but is a symbol for both efficient (agent) and *formal* (ideational and intentional) causes. The formal element is the mental reality of the witch's bad motive; this is countered by the intentional mental reality of the healing chicane. That is why the chicane is a symbol, and why healing is a ritual-symbolic act. The *final cause*, to which everything is turned, is the annulling of the malevolent intention of the offending witch, with the consequent well-being of the patient.

The chicane is the symbolic instantiation of the cure in the physical removal of the witchcraft object. The witch-doctor 'knows' this even if he does not use our words. But what does the patient 'know' about this sleight-of-hand? It is not necessary for patients to be naive and credulous, even if often they are. Evans-Pritchard is emphatic that many Azande have a healthy scepticism about their witch-doctors,³¹ but there is no need to suppose that this hinders engagement in the performance where physical need and

³¹ *ibid.* see for example pp. 165, 183, 191.

emotional affect are invoked. The body and the emotions have their own good reasons to suspend judgment where issues of health, life and death are concerned. Perhaps most witch-doctors cheat and are no use most of the time, but this witch-doctor here-and-now *may* be good, and that is what counts. We infer yet again in the attitude of ordinary Azande the softening of logical generalisation and the unbinding of abstraction characteristic of double-thinking and primitive mentality. All that is required is that the patient enters into the one-off performance here-and-now, 'as if' the witch-bone removed from his or her body 'really is' the illness removed.

A sympathetic modern interpretation would allow the witch-doctors an erratic modicum of empirical medicine amplified by suggestion and the placebo effect. This may not be an inaccurate representation within a modern and scientific perspective, yet laying out the case in this way nevertheless falls far short of understanding. This is because the clear distinction we make between pairs such as empirical medicine and placebo, literal and symbolic, is a function of *our* conceptual framework and cultural presuppositions, and therefore of our reality. We face a problem insisted upon by Lévy-Bruhl, and conceded by Evans-Pritchard,³² that there are elements of the primitive mentality that are opaque to us, and which we are consistently prone to misinterpret. Quite apart from cultural nuances lost in translation into European languages, if we accept the likelihood of double-thinking then even apparently straightforward statements may not grant us a reliable understanding of the mental process at work. We also note that at the time of his acting as an informant to Evans-Pritchard, Kamanga was young in the craft. Given the marked reserve of his teachers, their love of allusion and innuendo and the duplex nature of their thinking, we remain with an uncertain hinterland where the paths, shadowy and mysterious for the witch-doctors themselves, are utterly obscure for us. For us to make any advance into this realm requires the uncommon gift of having at least an inkling of those same paths in our own experience, whether this is attained by symbolic and divinatory practice, or whether it springs from inborn *Metis*.

Defining Medicine

Even without treading obscure paths of our own experience, we will recognise with some clarity a fundamental concept that enables us to take the first step into this hinterland. This resides in the understanding of *medicine*, common not just to the Azande but to primitive thought as a whole: 'it is of mystical causes and cures and not physical causes and cures that Azande speak and towards which they chiefly direct their attention'.³³ Evans-Pritchard counters the suggestion that Azande are 'stating in

³² Evans-Pritchard's enterprise comes consistently closer to the later Lévy-Bruhlian perspective than he may have recognised, and this proximity of thought emerges in the material on witch-doctor practices discussed here. His position is established in his initial stand against the polarised definition of primitive mentality as 'pre-logical' found in Lévy-Bruhl's early work. There are a number of occasions in *Witchcraft, oracles and magic...* where he implicitly sets out to counter this earlier definition. There is also a strong possibility that Lévy-Bruhl has himself been influenced by the criticisms of Evans-Pritchard. See Evans-Pritchard, *A History of Anthropological Thought* (London, 1981), p.131.

³³ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, p. 315.

mystical idiom facts based on observation and experiment'. He allows that some Azande medicines do produce the intended empirical effect, but the Azande does not seek a distinction that we would make between ritual and objective consequences. Medicines that from our pharmacological understanding are wholly ineffective 'are all alike *ngua*, medicine, and all are operated in magical rites and in much the same manner'.³⁴ This is well brought out in the Azande attitude to the key material agent of the Poison Oracle, *benge*, a red powder prepared from a wild forest creeper; this was used on chickens, and in pre-colonial times occasionally on humans.³⁵ Although from a botanical perspective the creeper of the same name is a poisonous plant, the oracular function of the medicine is not a natural attribute, but depends on it being addressed correctly and employed in the traditional manner, observing appropriate taboos; 'hence Azande say that if it is deprived of its potency for some reason or other it is just an ordinary thing, mere wood'.³⁶ Evans-Pritchard suggests that the Azande would be 'amazed at the credulity' of the European who might attempt controlled experiments in poisoning chickens in order to determine the natural properties of *benge*.³⁷ This would show an astonishing ignorance of 'medicine'.

On this basis we may comprehend something of the potent *mbiro* medicine of the witch-doctors, used for both divination and healing.³⁸ A witch-doctor keeps *mbiro* in a special pot, and mixes it with various herbs and substances; if he falls ill, it is his own *mbiro* that he takes as medicine. There is an intimate relationship between *mbiro* and the witch-bone through *ranga*, which is the name for a plant from which witch-bone is made, and (it seems by extension) for other witchcraft objects manipulated in healing. *Ranga* is eaten to create the *mbiro* in the belly of the witch-doctor. This in turn becomes or produces witchcraft-phlegm; a significant moment in the initiation of the novice involves his swallowing a small amount of this substance retched up by his teacher.³⁹ It is in this manner that the transmission of *mbiro* magic is effected; and it is a transmission that comes into play in the chicane. Kamanga explained that his teachers

³⁴ *ibid.* pp. 316, 448. The efficacy of each medicine is self-contained and operative only for the unique situation for which that medicine is intended.

³⁵ *ibid.* pp. 309-312.

³⁶ *ibid.* p. 314, also p. 448: 'it is man who manufactures from it the medicine...'

³⁷ *ibid.* p.315. From our scientific perspective, the efficacy of *benge* resides in a compound of the strychnine family. Evans-Pritchard established that Azande have no concept of *benge* as 'literally' poisonous in our simple pharmacological sense - when it kills it kills ritually as an aspect of its function as oracle. This well illustrates the fact that medicines - like illness itself - are all alike taken up by Azande ritually and symbolically, a mode of concern that is not categorially founded in natural properties.

³⁸ *ibid.* p. 227.

³⁹ *ibid.* p. 225: from the account the term *ranga* may refer also to other objects carrying the same magical potency. There is, perhaps understandably, some ambiguity in Evans-Pritchard's text on the definition of *ranga*.

had spoken to him 'with hidden meaning in their words' prior to his knowledge of the witch-bone; they said '*mbiro*, *mbiro*, it is *mbiro* which is the great curer, don't play the fool with *mbiro*'.⁴⁰

The Literal Stop in Interpretation

It is an inescapable element of theory and interpretation that we arrive at a point where we declare what is 'really going on', as opposed to what seems or is commonly thought to be going on. Here is the meeting point of metaphoric and literal knowledge. In talking of the literal, it should be borne in mind that literal expressions may at the same time be entirely abstract, philosophical, or theoretical (eg. 'kinship structure'); similarly, a symbolic or metaphoric form may be treated literally (eg. 'underlying the chicane is the Mercurius archetype').⁴¹ This is a stopping-point when we imagine we have to look no further back and behind the phenomena to find another explanation.

This hermeneutic element is itself a device of literal explanation; as such it serves to clarify the several understandings involved in the witch-doctor's chicane. For the most credulous patients interpretation stops at the surface of events. The chicane has no back-and-behind, and *is not chicane*, since the real happening is the performed event, unseen as chicane. The witchcraft object 'really is' the evil of the illness, its removal literally is the removal of the illness. This is why Kamanga is truly shocked by Evans-Pritchard's exposé of the chicane of Bögwözu; he discovers a hinterland that he never even guessed at, and the veil is torn away without appropriate ritual and without symbolic guards.

The need for a hermeneutic of the chicane becomes pressing as we leave the ordinary villager and seek to penetrate witch-doctor imagination, for we find that the literal stop is moved at least one step back from the surface of things and into the symbolic domain; it is this step above all that distinguishes the initiate. This is readily observed in Kamanga's account, introduced above. As an initiate he now understands that the leech-craft performance is chicane: the 'real' cure is effected by the *mbiro* medicine, rubbed onto the patient's body, 'and only witch-doctors know that it is the medicine which heals people'.⁴² But this raises a further puzzling question.

We have well enough established the game of reciprocal intentions in play in witchcraft healing, but the issue becomes more rather than less subtle as we focus our

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p. 227.

⁴¹ Moving in a complementary direction to the literal, the symbol, recognised as symbol, is equally the stopping point of interpretation. Examples are archetypes *in themselves* and true religious symbols, such as 'Christ'. This interpretive movement is elusive in ordinary parlance, since symbols spontaneously and continuously metamorphose into literals, concrete or abstract, in the process of thinking and talking; and as suggested in this study, the distinction we have learned to make between 'literal' and 'symbolic' may be less secure than we sometimes imagine.

⁴² *ibid.* p. 236.

attention on the mode of thought of the witch-doctor. We bump up against the inadequacy of our taken-for-granted distinction between 'literal' and 'symbolic', and likewise between 'objective' and 'mystical' categories.⁴³ Fluidity across the literal-symbolic bound is part of double-thinking. This is most obvious when we consider the apparent literal stop to interpretation offered by Kamanga, when he asserts that *mbiro* medicine is the 'real' agent of healing. But what is *mbiro*? As we have seen, the power of a herb or medicine is essentially psycho-spiritual rather than material, and by psycho-spiritual is meant the efficient agency of knowing and intention, in this case the witch-doctor's healing intent. *Mbiro* 'literally' embodies the transmission of knowledge from initiate to pupil, and it is amongst the most intimate carriers of the witch-doctor's own power. It is the non-mediated, non-conceptual fabric of ritual and medicine within which he has been initiated. The *ranga* which produces it is at work in the belly of the witch-doctor,⁴⁴ but it is also *ranga* that he uses to fashion the witchcraft-object extracted from the patient.

Although Kamanga talks literally as if *mbiro* is the literal stop, we remember the lesson of granny's ring and realise that it is highly unlikely that experienced witch-doctors take all of their devices and rituals 'simply literally' in our positivistic modern sense. I infer - although it seems difficult to imagine a way of proving this - that the movement of thought will be towards non-concluded double-thinking. Perhaps some witch-doctors adopt a simple literalism of *mbiro* much of the time, yet the apparent literalism in Kamanga's statement - or in what Evans-Pritchard has understood from Kamanga - scarcely disguises the fact that in our terms *mbiro* is a participatory complex of psycho-spiritual (symbolic) healing for a psycho-spiritual (symbolic) wound manifesting as a literal bodily ill. The psycho-spiritual (symbolic) wound is the embodied malaise of sociopathic disturbance and ill-intent that Europeans call 'witchcraft'. My parentheses assert that we must take the idea of symbol not simply as a remote signifier but in an immediate and embodied sense; or if we say the medicine is a metaphor, then it is a metaphor that 'carries over' into empirical phenomena - and the ultimate empirical phenomenon of the human body - in the most material of ways. Such embodiment astounds us, it is alien to our ordinary assumptions, making it difficult for us to understand.

It is therefore in the magical thinking of the witch-doctor with his consubstantiality of herbs, medicines, body-fluids, and magical objects, and the participation of all of these objects in the field of his conscious intention, that we see the relevance of Lévy-Bruhl's *participation mystique*, for here above all we find the gathering of symbolic and literal, ritual and material metamorphosed in an embodied and empirical worldly goal. Kamanga's self-assured rationalisation of the chicane shows that he has imbibed its

⁴³ Philip Peek, 'African Divination Systems - Non-Normal Modes of Cognition' in Peek (ed.), *African Divination Systems*, (Bloomington, 1991), p. 8, argues that primitive divination 'makes definite use of both modes of thinking'; there is still be a demarcation, but the modes may alternate. This alternation bears comparison with my description of double-thinking.

⁴⁴ Medicine in the belly suggests a mythological motif. Like Metis, wisdom resides in the belly of Zeus.

essential nature, and that is why he has begun to travel the path of the initiate. The witch-doctor's move carries the symbol, known or intuited *as such*, into the body of his patient, where the simple villager - and the simple ethnographer - may cling to more literal interpretations.

The Dance of Divination

I have discussed in some detail the chicane, the symbolic and the literal in the medicine of the Azande witch-doctors, in order to suggest that a similar double-thinking is likely to be found in their divination practice. With this suggestion in mind, I focus here on the Azande 'dance of divination'. Evans-Pritchard gives an evocative account and close analysis of the 'seance' and the dance of divination, allowing us to infer something of the cognitive process involved. A group of witch-doctors will perform publicly at the request of a householder who may have suffered misfortune.⁴⁵ There is a chorus of boys backing up the songs, but everyone is harangued to take part. Dancing takes place to the beat of drums and gongs. Throughout the whole exuberant performance there is a ceaseless battle against witchcraft; if someone annoys the witch-doctors by a wrong attitude, or in their divination they suspect the person of being a witch, they may with a flourish project a witchcraft object into the offender. This is done by the witch-doctor 'raising his leg and sharply kicking out in the direction of his objective'. Following the attack, the witch-doctor 'may walk up to him and theatrically remove his shaft, generally from the forehead when the missile is a black beetle'. There are in addition spectacular mock battles between witch-doctors, with an occasional ill-natured element; in one such incident Kamanga achieved a notable victory, causing the hat and leglets of a jealous rival to fall off by means of his magic ammunition.⁴⁶ Projecting witch-bones in a theatrical manner is a feature of the dance and is an explicit and intentional chicane, but it does not directly bear on divination. However, the dance for the *likikpwo* mentioned earlier is an explicit chicane combining both divination and healing. This takes place with a group of unfortunates who have all had this psychic organ stolen and hidden by witches. The witch-doctor has a secret supply of rat-guts on his person while he dances, waiting for his divinations to discover their supposed hiding places,⁴⁷ and in this sense the divination itself is a chicane. As with leechcraft, we infer that the embodiment in rat-gut is interpreted in a literal manner by most villagers. For the witch-doctor it exists in ritual-symbolic form, as he metamorphoses the symbol into the patient's body with a thump.

In the usual dance of divination, the witch-doctors dance singly or in twos or threes, taking questions from their audience.⁴⁸ The witch-doctor responds by dancing until he is breathless, and stumbling as if drunk. This is the usual moment for him to utter an oracular response, in a strained voice: 'it appears as though the words come to him from

⁴⁵ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, pp. 163-4.

⁴⁶ *ibid.* pp. 179-80.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* p. 237.

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p. 168.

without and that he has difficulty in hearing and transmitting them'.⁴⁹ As he proceeds, he 'begins to throw off his air of semi-consciousness and to give forth his revelations with assurance, and eventually with truculence'. He may dance again for further revelation, or move to another enquiry. He may run across to gaze into his medicine-pot.⁵⁰ Sometimes he halts midstream, and another witch-doctor interjects to assist him with a response.⁵¹ Questions are often gradually answered, bit by bit over many hours, by a drawn-out process of exclusion (it is not this person who is the witch, it is not that person). At the end, it is common for the witch-doctor to whisper the name of the culprit to the enquirer; this is safer for everyone, and the enquirer can then choose to settle the matter by consulting the more authoritative Poison Oracle, apart from the witch-doctor performance.

It is apparent from various accounts that witch-doctor divination commonly involves two principal modes. The core mode is an altered state of consciousness, marked by unusual physiological phenomena. Certain of these gatherings lead to frenzied performances where the witch-doctors enlarge the whites of their eyes, contort and cut themselves, or gash their tongues with knives and foam at the mouth.⁵² Cognitive dissociation is induced by drumming, dancing, and exhaustion; this is the *abaissement du niveau mental*, the 'lowering of the mental level' to induce the manifestation of subliminal phenomena.⁵³

The witch-doctors, obtaining the names of several potential culprits (ie. witches) by a separate procedure discussed below, enter the core mode of divination by 'dancing to' the name of the individual:

...they keep the names in their memory and repeat them now and again, but otherwise allow their minds to become a complete blank. Suddenly one of the persons to whom he is dancing obtrudes himself upon the witch-doctor's consciousness, sometimes as a visual image, but generally by an association of the idea and the name of the witch with a physiological disturbance, chiefly in a sudden quickening of the heartbeats, which begin to pulsate violently, pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat.⁵⁴

This core mode of divination is where participants know the oracle to be active;

⁴⁹ ibid. pp. 162, 169.

⁵⁰ ibid. p. 167.

⁵¹ ibid. p. 166.

⁵² ibid. p. 162. Evans-Pritchard reports Mgr. Lagae's observation of witch-doctors walking on burning embers.

⁵³ The *abaissement* emerges in psychological theory in the work of Pierre Janet. I suggest this is functionally related to double-thinking.

⁵⁴ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, p. 175.

without this, there may be no oracle. According to the witch-doctors, the dance 'stirs up and makes active the medicines within them, so that when they are asked a question they will always dance it rather than ponder it to find the answer'.⁵⁵ The witch-doctor 'goes into the soul of the medicine...[until it] will stand alert within him'.⁵⁶ The medicine 'glows in his body and through it he begins to see witchcraft clearly'.⁵⁷

It is difficult to come to a firm view on chicane elements in the core mode in the absence of studies dedicated to this task. Evans-Pritchard provides us with some marvellous descriptions, but he also exemplifies the struggle of classical anthropology to offer an adequate interpretation of divination. He declares that 'a witch-doctor divines successfully because he says what his listener wishes him to say, and because he uses tact'.⁵⁸ On the other hand Evans-Pritchard asserts that 'we must allow the Azande witch-doctor a measure of intuition and not attribute his utterances solely to his reason'.⁵⁹ The witch-doctors fully believe in their magic,⁶⁰ and they will undoubtedly identify with its power at the instant of being seized by a clairvoyant image or a strong mental impression accompanied by physiological sensations. So is this chicane or not-chicane? Evans-Pritchard has to settle for the dance of divination as 'only partly a pose'.⁶¹ This ambiguity perfectly expresses the paradox of double-thinking for the objective observer. In the midst of his ecstasy the witch-doctor keeps his wits about himself sufficiently to avoid causing dangerous offence in what he says, as when he employs innuendo,⁶² or whispers the name of a witch to the interested party. This shows us that a guiding light of ratiocination passes right through the ecstasy and holds it in an ethical and social compass. It is not an either-or case; both sides of the equation define divination.

Locating the Divinatory Chicane

Beyond the ecstatic state at the core of witch-doctor divination, there is a broader phase or mode involving dialogue, negotiation and interpretation. It is in this broader mode that the divinatory chicane emerges more obviously, and where it has been readily (and

⁵⁵ *ibid.* p. 167.

⁵⁶ *ibid.* p. 176.

⁵⁷ *ibid.* p. 165, quoting an informant of Mgr. Lagae.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 170.

⁵⁹ *ibid.* pp. 175-6: 'a witch-doctor... does not simply weigh up the advantages of denouncing this or that man... there is a measure of free and unconscious association'.

⁶⁰ *ibid.* p. 255.

⁶¹ *ibid.* p. 170.

⁶² *ibid.* p. 172: *Sanza*, innuendo, is much appreciated by the Azande, and is a common device in divinatory responses.

negatively) interpreted as chicane by ethnographers. This part of divination is a vehicle or container for the core of divinatory 'realisation', establishing the ground and even the possibility of divination and sustaining its meaningfulness for all participants, before and after the event. It is both the precondition for divination and the way in which divinatory meaning is worked out to the satisfaction of everyone involved, including the audience in a public performance. Its first and most important element is that the questioner establishes a limited field of concern for the diviner, usually by stating his or her misfortune or problem and by negotiating with the witch-doctor several possible witches to be considered.⁶³ These are the names to whom he will dance.

The declaring of the problem and a list of suspects is only the most obvious of the preparatory elements for divination; the witch-doctors have other work to do. The following summary of this groundwork is drawn mainly from Evans-Pritchard's deconstructive analysis of the chicane. He observes that the witch-doctors pay considerable attention to moulding the expectations and understandings of client and audience. They build up faith in their powers 'by lavish use of professional dogmatism'.⁶⁴ They display great confidence, boast of their prowess and successes, and continually promise that they will discover the secrets that lie behind the various misfortunes in their audience; all this within a dramatic performance of dancing, drumming and singing. Whenever they give answers, these are tailored to provide maximum impact for minimum specificity.⁶⁵ Where the diviner is specific, then it is likely to be on a magical or witchcraft topic which of its nature is not open to verification. Here he can speak with the unchallenged authority of the oracle. However, it is in gaining information from his audience and potential enquirers that the diviner is most adept. This is skillfully elicited in exchanges either before the ceremony, or during the dance of divination. There is a limited stock of common human concerns to draw on; the witch-doctors know the power and status relationships in their community, and they know most of the local squabbles and scandals in advance. A visiting witch-doctor will get advice from his local colleagues.⁶⁶

In contact with the questioner and an audience, the diviner employs what has come to be known as *cold reading*.⁶⁷ This refers to the capacity, which may be subliminal or

⁶³ ibid. p. 175.

⁶⁴ ibid. p. 171.

⁶⁵ This is known as the *Barnum effect*. The diviner offers statements of an almost universal applicability that seem specific yet will be agreed upon by everyone; or, offers a general statement geared to the particular client's situation, yet with no obvious falsifiable detail. The client fills in specific details, crediting the diviner with having a marvellous insight into their situation. See note on 'cold reading' below.

⁶⁶ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, p. 170.

⁶⁷ For cold reading and the Barnum effect see Geoffrey Dean, Arthur Mather, and Ivan Kelly, 'Astrology' in Gordon Stein (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Paranormal* (New York, 1996), p.91. These terms come from modern psychology and are common amongst rationalist sceptics ('skeptics') of astrology and divination.

fully conscious, to pick up clues from the body language of the client and in this case also the audience. In addition clues are garnered from the response to questions. From this information the diviner is able to feed back a plausible interpretation without apparently having been told the relevant details.

It is worth mentioning here the parallels with Victor Turner's analysis of the Ndembu diviners.⁶⁸ His study concerns basket-divination, involving the initiated diviner shaking a basket of symbolic objects (his 'bones'). In terms of the spectrum of divination, 'divination with the bones' does not involve the ecstatic condition of the dance of divination, and falls nearer the objectified end of the continuum. In my view the universal structure of divinatory interpretation is replicated, however, with a negotiating and dialogical element fundamental to the act of divination. Consultants of basket-divination will travel far to ensure that a diviner is not simply relying on local knowledge, but his skill at cold reading will soon overcome their guard: 'he notes the kind and intensity of their reactions, positive and negative, to his questions and statements...'; the symbolism of the bones is vague and flexible, allowing him to easily establish a reference to the situation he now infers. When he has fed back a convincing interpretation, he has established a 'certain psychological ascendancy over his audience, "softened them up"'.⁶⁹ He even rebukes them when he guesses they are misleading him or withholding vital information. He probes them 'after the manner of the English party game "Twenty Questions"', which allows him to rapidly close on the particulars of a name, such as the undisclosed name of a deceased relative, in a way that appears miraculous. At that point he has increased their credulity to such a pitch that 'the logician is felt to be a magician'.⁷⁰ Turner comes to a conclusion that accords closely with the observations of Evans-Pritchard amongst the Azande, concerning the end-point of the divining process. The principal revelation obtained refers to witchcraft, to errors in ritual, or to the ancestors: 'the causes of misfortune or death ...are almost invariably mystical or nonempirical in character, although human wishes, desires, and feelings are involved in their operation'.⁷¹ This appears to be a cardinal principle of primitive divination.

Within anthropology there have been two broad directions of interpretation of the divinatory chicane. The rather old-fashioned and simple-minded version is that the phenomena we have discussed show a combination of outright charlatanry (such as the explicit and intentional chicane of witch-doctor healing) and simple ignorance. Simple ignorance is of course shown by the villager, but may be the situation of the diviner who does not understand the power of cold-reading and the psychology of dialogue; in this case the chicane is implicit. A more modern version, illuminated by the insight of

⁶⁸ Victor Turner, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, 1973).

⁶⁹ *ibid.* p. 240.

⁷⁰ *ibid.* pp. 240-1.

⁷¹ *ibid.* p. 209.

sociology and structural functionalism, sees in these interactions of diviners and clients the sustainment of social harmony and the social structure: divination is one of several 'institutionalised mechanisms of redress which are ordered towards the maintenance of that social structure'.⁷² For sociological interpretations, even the explicit and intentional chicane may be explained by this mechanism, while the broader negotiated element of the divinatory process depends on a structural but subliminal and implicit chicane.

In terms of our metaphor of chicane, a feature of the sociological imagination is that the chicane is interpreted more naturalistically, like the function of a baffle-board in a speaker; this tends to downplay the possibility of 'intelligent semblance' by a fully aware diviner, witch-doctor or shaman. Even very subtle and convincing demonstrations of the role of kinship structures in divination, such as that of Devisch,⁷³ prove beyond doubt that this social structure is foundational, yet tend in my view to underplay the role of the initiate's intelligence. I do not wish to criticise a valid sociological perspective; however, if the approach I have adopted is plausible, then this perspective needs to be augmented by the recognition that these diviners are working at a high level within their culture, moving in the mode of sophisticated double-thinking, and negotiating the order that we call 'symbolic'. There is certainly no doubt about the intelligence of the witch-doctors and the diviners, treated as a class. This is a common report from many observers, although depending on the style of interpretation of the chicane, this may also be called 'cunning'.⁷⁴ However, Philip Peek speaks for a new generation of anthropologists who completely reject the charlatan tag: 'we have found diviners to be men and women of exceptional wisdom and high personal character'.⁷⁵ This new appraisal goes together with the view that diviners and divination embody the epistemology of a culture, in much the same way as a system of law or the interpretations of theology and metaphysics.

The Joker

This brings me to a final remark about current interpretations of the chicane. Apart from scattered heretics,⁷⁶ orthodox anthropology has ducked a major epistemological

⁷² ibid. p. 236.

⁷³ René Devisch, 'Mediumistic Divination Amongst the Northern Yaka of Zaire', in Philip M. Peek (ed.) *African Divination Systems* pp. 112-132 (Bloomington, 1991).

⁷⁴ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, p. 175.

⁷⁵ Philip Peek, 'African Divination Systems - Non-Normal Modes of Cognition' in Peek (ed.), *African Divination Systems*, (Bloomington, 1991), p. 3.

⁷⁶ A significant heretic in the field of divination studies is Roy Willis; see Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture: Pulling Down the Moon* (Oxford, 2004) esp. chapters 9 and 10 discussing the breaking of the taboo on the paranormal. There are very few professional anthropologists who will risk their academic careers through a discussion of *their own experience* of divination as valid knowing. We may talk about these things second-hand but not directly, which is perhaps our own weak version of the chicane.

and metaphysical problem. This may be expressed as follows: quite apart from all the rational and functionalist interpretations that might explain the behaviour of witch-doctors; quite apart from the possibility that they have acquired a pharmacological knowledge of some herbs, and apart even from psychophysical explanations of placebo; apart from all these, there may be some other residuum in their knowledge, for which we can offer no adequate account. With very few exceptions, the explanations that we have adopted fail to give weight to the following possibility: that empirical phenomena of a paranormal (supernatural or preternatural) provenance are at least partial determinants for primitive ritual and divinatory practice.⁷⁷ Any such suggestion has been treated as taboo and an absolute non-possibility by most anthropologists; 'witchcraft is imaginary', says Evans-Pritchard, 'and a man cannot possibly be a witch.'⁷⁸ To bring in the paranormal is the Joker in the deck, not least because we have almost no way in our present thinking to deal with it. I will however appeal to my first mentor in these discussions, Lévy-Bruhl, in his telling observation that primitive mentality is founded in the mythopoeic realm and in what he termed the 'affective category of the supernatural'.⁷⁹

The witch-doctors and their double-thinking chicane may prove to be a significant path for opening the intellectual question of divination and the manner of its revelation. This bears upon the nature of mind itself. Here, I suggest, is a trump card in the apparently empty hand of primitive mentality.

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⁷⁷ We struggle with terms at this point. I use 'paranormal' to encompass two possible classes of occurrence, and to avoid getting stuck in distinctions between them that would take us into a large metaphysical debate. These possible classes are those of the *supernatural*, which is supposed to lie entirely beyond and 'above' our known world and the order of nature; and *preternatural*, which lies beyond the order of nature as known to contemporary science, but which is presumed to fall within the scope of a much-enhanced future science. Telepathy between dogs and their owners may well class as 'preternatural' without us needing to invoke the theological implications that tend to go with the idea of the supernatural. Witchcraft phenomena, if they are considered to be 'real', may arguably be preternatural rather than supernatural, but this question remains wide open.

⁷⁸ This *literally stops* any further consideration that there might be a way in which the Azande notion is 'real' (i.e. in our terms, has some empirical foundation).

⁷⁹ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*, tr. Peter Rivière (Oxford, 1975), p. 63: 'It is a reality which is felt at one and the same time as beyond doubt and as having something peculiar to it which characterizes it directly'. In respect of my concluding comments, we may note his dry but revolutionary observation that we need to understand the relations of belief and experience 'in a manner quite different' from the approach adopted in our modern psychology and philosophy. (ibid. p. 150).

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