
Religious Premises and Logical Technique in Divinatory Ritual

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Religious premisses and logical technique
in divinatory ritual

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[Plates 20 and 21]

Divination is a relatively clear-cut configuration of ritual action which embodies fundamental constituents of religious and magical systems and is easily accessible to repeated observation. It is a pivotal institution in very many of these systems the world over, and the diviner is a key functionary in the cult activities associated with them. This has been well known since antiquity. Greek and Roman omens and oracles, Hebrew prophecy and Oriental astrology are well-known examples. But I do not want to discuss divination in general. What I have in mind is to give some account of the configuration and technique of divination, as I have witnessed and participated in it among the Tallensi of Northern Ghana, in concrete illustration of the thesis I shall put forward.

To make my case, I must first indicate what I understand by the concept of ritual. Anthropologists are not all of one mind on this, as both Professor Turner's and Dr Leach's papers in our symposium demonstrate. In its colloquial sense the term has come to be widely used to include almost every kind of stylized or stereotyped verbal and motor behaviour that is habitual or customary in a given social environment. Journalists write of the 'ritual' of cricket, of Parliament, of the law, of taking a university degree. More commonly and narrowly, the word is associated with such things as the Christian communion service, coronations, funerals, etc., etc. Among anthropologists the current vogue is to emphasize the 'communication' function of ritual.

In a sense all these extensions are implicit in the most orthodox anthropological notions of ritual. Take the following definition from that highly respectable quarter, *Notes and queries in anthropology* (1951 edn., p. 175): 'Ritual, like etiquette, is a formal mode of behaviour recognized as correct, but unlike the latter it implies belief in the operation of supernatural agencies or forces.'

Note first, the juxtaposition and secondly, the antithesis here implied. To put it in Durkheimian language, ritual is a form of etiquette in the context of the sacred, etiquette is profane ritual. Interestingly enough, this is a way of looking at ritual which has affinities with the Confucian notion of *li* as expounded in the famous book of etiquette and ritual the *I LI* (cf. Needham 1951, p. 14).

By this reasoning, if we emphasize their manifest form, the genuflection of the devout Catholic before the high altar is but a variant of the obeisance with which a commoner greets royalty. Both are customary gestures of respect.

By similar reasoning there are acts of ritual which can be subsumed under the same rubrics as communication in general, or language, drama, literature and art in particular,

or epistemology, or—remember Frazer—even science, albeit only as a bastard offshoot of the latter. If, to give a trivial example, ritual is wholly subsumed within the category of ‘communication’ then the policeman on point duty is performing a very explicit and efficacious ritual. If ritual is only a kind of etiquette then a dinner party is a ritual exercise. This of course ignores the fact which some might consider more important than his signals and that is the policeman’s authority as representative of the law, the fact that his signal is a command. The relevance of this will appear presently.

It is a short step from this to the position that there is no such thing as ritual *per se*, no actions, utterances, ideas and beliefs that belong specifically to a domain we can identify by the term ritual, as opposed to everything else in social life that is non-ritual. Equally, of course, by this principle of classification, a great many other conventionally distinguished categories of customs and institutions would be abolished. Judged only by the cultural media employed, by the ‘how’ and not the ‘what’ they are doing, a judicial decision, a political speech, a dramatic monologue and a sermon are all merely specimens of linguistic usage. Jurisprudence, politics, drama and religion all dissolve into the general phenomenon of language. It is like saying that jails, churches and theatres are all buildings of the same class because all are built of bricks from the same kilns.

The facts of observation here come to the rescue. Actors and observers are equally positive that ritual and non-ritual configurations of behaviour, attitude and belief are distinguishable from one another even when they make use of the same media of expression. No practising Roman Catholic would accept that there is not a fundamental distinction of meaning between his genuflection in church and his bow to royalty. No orthodox Jew would accept circumcision by a surgeon as the equivalent of ritual circumcision, though the result is the same. In fact provision is made in Jewish religious law for ritualizing a surgical circumcision by the performance of a special rite.

How then is this distinction made? The traditional anthropological criterion implied in the word ‘supernatural’ points the way. It suggests that the distinguishing feature of ritual lies, not in the internal constitution of actions, utterances and beliefs, but in their external signification, in their relationship with the total cultural environment.

Let me illustrate what I mean by this. There is a well-known Anglican hymn which begins:

*‘There is a blessed home
Beyond the land of woe’.*

Considered simply from within, as a linguistic communication, there is nothing to tell us that these words refer (metaphorically if you like) to a ‘supernatural’ realm. One can easily imagine an inmate of one of the ill-famed Japanese prisoner-of-war camps taking these words in a poetical (not religious) sense to remind him of his home in a corner of England. Placed in their ritual context—for the singing of hymns is a ritual performance in an Anglican religious service—these words have quite a different implication.

Yet ‘supernatural’ is an unfortunate term, in the light of modern field research, and such partially synonymous descriptions as ‘irrational’, ‘superstitious’, ‘mystical’, ‘alogical’ and ‘non-empirical’ are just as misleading. The dichotomy implied between a ‘natural’ universe, subject to laws ascertainable by natural science, and a superimposed realm in which these laws do not operate is very much an artifact of literate cultures, our own and those of the Orient. The way the actor—the believer (at any rate in tribal

societies of the kind we find in Africa)—sees his world is different. He sees it as made up of what one might call things patent and things hidden—or, to rehabilitate a much abused word, things occult—which present themselves in mixed sequences and combinations in a common reality.

The difference lies in the fact that the occult can only be known about indirectly by its effects, by its apparently arbitrary interventions in routine existence, whereas things patent can be known in the last resort by sensory experience. What is more, things patent fall into place, or are believed to do so, in conformity with the regularities of material, causal relations, as understood in a particular cultural community. This means that they are, ideally speaking, predictable, because they are susceptible of management by technical means. The occult powers, forces, agencies, relations and so on, hypostatized in ritual are not believed to behave in conformity with material-causal relations or to be predictable or amenable to technical operations. They respond only to ritual action. But conceptually distinguishable as they are both to actor and observer, the patent and the occult are mixed up in the objects and events of actuality. The occult is, by definition, only accessible to recognition and action through the patent, sometimes more so, sometimes less so.

Consider this from our point of view. Scientific explanation reinforces our confidence in our world-view and our knowledge of the universe. It never, I suggest, wholly eliminates the streak of superstition (shock or delight) with which even the most enlightened materialist reacts to the effects of what we call chance or luck in matters of such vital concern as life and death, health and sickness and so forth. In non-western civilization it is (among others) happenings which we would classify in terms of chance, luck and coincidence which are commonly taken to testify to the reality of occult forces and agencies of the kind which we translate by words like magic, witchcraft, ancestor spirits, nature spirits, etc.

My thesis is that ritual is distinguished from non-ritual by the fact that it is aimed at the occult. More exactly, I would define ritual as procedure for prehending the occult, that is first, for grasping what is, for a particular culture, occult in the events and incidents of people's lives, secondly, for binding what is so grasped by means of the ritual resources and beliefs available in that culture, and thirdly, for thus incorporating what is grasped and bound into the normal existence of individuals and groups. Thus regarded ritual is not synonymous with the whole of a religious or magical system. It is, so to speak, the executive arm of such systems. And in performing the task of prehending the occult it necessarily makes use of all the resources of society and culture, from the inborn capacities of the human organism at one end of the scale to logical thought, language, song, art and so forth at the other. But as I argued earlier, these serve only as the media of ritual. They are not distinctive of it.

To be efficacious, then, ritual must, first, get through to the occult (as in divination) and, secondly, accomplish what might seem to be, by definition, the impossible task of seizing hold of the occult.

This is where symbolism of the kind discussed by Professor Turner becomes relevant. Symbolism has, ever since Tylor and Frazer, been regarded as the essence of ritual. But it is only since Freud that we have begun to understand the mechanisms of ritual

symbolism. We see that ritual prehends the occult not by exposing it (as science does with the laws of nature, and the judicial process does with the motives of actors, cf. Gluckman 1955), but by disguising it and bringing it thus into the dimension of the patent.

The significance of this can be illustrated by a simple example. Among the Tallensi when a man's wife has a baby he sends a messenger to announce the birth to his parents-in-law. If the baby is a boy, the messenger arrives carrying a cockerel and a throwing stick of the kind men carry when they go hunting. If it is a girl, he brings a pullet and a calabash dish of the kind every woman uses in her kitchen. Passers-by, seeing the messenger on his way, call out, 'Whose wife has had a son (or daughter)?' The symbolism here is wholly patent and the occasion is not a ritual one. Contrast this with the following situation. Every Tallensi knows that if you see a man walking rapidly with a divining bag slung on one shoulder and a chicken in the hand he must be a diviner on his way home from a divination session at a funeral. And everyone knows also that it is a taboo for him to turn round and look back. He must go straight home to offer the chicken, which was his fee, to his divining shrine. The symbolism here relates to the notion that the diviner summoned his divining ancestors to attend at the divination session and that he must lead them straight back to their home on pain of disaster if he fails to comply. But finally to grasp the implications of this we must know that divining ancestors are peculiarly persecutory and unpredictable. This then is a ritual situation.

A great deal of ritual symbolism presents the occult as located in the natural environment—in trees and stones, in the heavens above and the earth below. This is deceptive. It is true that many people's theories of how nature works, what causes rain or drought, plant growth, or animal breeding, and so on, are couched in terms of gods and spirits, witchcraft and magic. Thus we find rituals which purport to be directed towards influencing or even coercing what we think of as physical and biological reality. But as Malinowski and others have shown, closely examined these rituals are in fact aimed at such ends as allaying the anxiety evoked by the unpredictability of many environmental forces or dramatizing (as Seligman called it) the conviction of man's power to influence nature by his moral conduct and intellectual skills. Thus much ritual directed towards the environment can better be regarded as a form of projection, to borrow a Freudian term, than as a substitute for technology.

In short, the occult that is the primary concern of ritual, inheres in the basic social relationships and the fundamental drives and dispositions of mankind without which social life could not go on. It is perhaps worth noting, in this connexion, the evidence offered by psychopathology to the effect that many occurrences which we automatically attribute to luck, chance or accident, are in fact precipitated by hidden, that is unconscious, emotional factors. Though the man in the street is ignorant of this, and fortunately so for his own security of mind, he does feel that luck, chance and accident stand for the emergence into the routine of life of occult, unpredictable, ritually but not technically controllable forces. The relationship between his view and the psychopathologist's bears a close resemblance to that of the tribal believer and the anthropological observer.

To bring home my point, let us consider, for a moment, the 'passage' rites made famous by van Gennep's book *Les Rites de Passage* (1908). It is not the physical mysteries of birth, marriage and death that cause them to be ritualized in all human societies, but the basic

inscrutability and potential intractability of the social relationships and psychological dispositions represented in these events. Modern researches, such as those discussed by Erikson and Ambrose in the present Symposium, give us an inkling of the complexity of even such apparently elementary and spontaneously social relationships as those of mother and child. It is not surprising that there is some ritual in most human societies aimed at grasping, binding, and incorporating, into the overt customs and practices of life, the ambivalances of love and hate, dependence and self-assertion which underlie the relations of parents and children but cannot be understood in causal terms and dare not be admitted as motives of action. Likewise, rituals connected with death are aimed at repairing ruptured social relationships and at prehending the psychological mystery of mourning-grief and the sociological mystery presented by the fact that a person's physical extinction does not obliterate the impress of his life on his society. Material objects he created or was associated with outlive him, and what is more the living (especially his progeny) continue him, partly physically, but more mysteriously in their personalities and in their relationships with one another, as if he were in some sense still among them (cf. Goody 1962).

It would not, I think, be out of step with modern anthropological theory to say that most, if not all, religious and magical ritual is concerned with prehending the unconscious (in the psychoanalytical sense) forces of individual action and existence and their social equivalents, the irreducible factors in social relations (e.g. the mother-child nexus, at one end of the scale, the authority of society at the other). By bringing them, suitably disguised, or symbolized in tangible material objects and actions, into the open of social life, ritual binds them and makes them manageable.

This bringing out into the open of social life is important. It implies legitimacy, authorization by consensus. Ritual has two sides, like coin of the realm, a 'white' side and a 'black' side. Good, that is 'white' ritual, is ritual that has collective authorization. Bad, that is 'black' ritual, is secret and antisocial and is supported by collusion not consensus. Here I might just interpolate that anthropologists generally speak of 'ritual' rather than 'ritualization'. But there are appropriate usages of the verbal form. *Rites de passage* have already been instanced. In the same way if we consider the ritual of coronation from the point of view of its manifest subject matter, we describe it as the ritualization of eminent office, and we can describe food taboos as the ritualization of eating customs (cf. Fortes 1962).

I return now to divination. In the most general terms, where divination is a central feature of a system of religion or magic, it is a ritual instrument by means of which choice is made, from among the total ritual resources of a community, of the right ritual measures for particular occasions and with regard to individual circumstances. Customary ritual, unlike the behaviour patterns described as ritual by psychopathologists, is standardized and universal in a given community. Much of it is as routine in incidence as is the normal run of social activities in the community. Meals come round regularly and so does grace before meals. But many ritualized happenings which are normal and regular within a community are unpredictable for the individual. Death, for instance, is a normal occurrence, but when it strikes a particular family it is experienced as a catastrophe. Luck, chance, accident, coincidence, and fate are some of the notions invoked to account for this. They may

be ritualized. The Edo of Benin, for example, believe a person's luck to be associated with his head and a man makes a sacrifice to his head when he has a stroke of good fortune (Bradbury 1957).

In other cultures such a happening is taken to represent a particular and specific intervention of the occult forces recognized by the culture in the life of an individual or a group. The function of divination is to establish the particularity of this intervention, to connect particular persons and occasions with the omnipresent occult. As Evans-Pritchard (1937) showed in his classical study, every Azande knows that misfortune is due to the occult force of witchcraft but when misfortune strikes a particular person he needs to find out who it is that has bewitched him and for this he resorts to divination. Such connexions have to be established also for prescriptive rituals that recur at regular times, for example, the annual sowing and harvest festivals common all over West Africa and elsewhere. The festivals recur in fixed form and at fixed times but the participants change from year to year as the result of deaths and births and the maturation of individuals, and divination is called for to allocate the standardized ritual duties and privileges.

I have spoken of divination as a ritual instrument. An apparatus of divination is often an essential part of the system, as among the Tallensi. But I have in mind more the fact that divination is often a specialized technique. The diviner may have to undergo training to become expert in it, or he may be selected for it by virtue of his talents or his psychological make-up. Not only this. A diviner must be properly accredited, often by a public initiation after evidence of his acceptance by the occult agencies.

The principle behind this is that the occult and the patent cannot, indeed must not, be known in the same way. If they were accessible to knowledge and experience in the same mode and by the same faculties the boundary between them would disappear. But that way lies chaos—or insanity. For though they are parts of a common reality they are complementary parts and must not be confounded. This indeed is the basic *raison d'être* for ritual.

This leads to another point. As divination is a technique, its practitioners will be judged by standards of proficiency similar to those that are applied to all technical operations. This predisposes towards a critical rather than credulous attitude on the part of the patrons. It is, moreover, not only a question of technical skill. The conceptual curtain between knowledge of the occult and knowledge of the patent must be kept in place. It is of the utmost importance therefore that purported manifestations of the occult must be verified by tests which eliminate the possibility of deception for ends which the frailty of human nature so easily tempts a person to seek. Hence divinatory verdicts are tested by posing the same questions in alternative forms, and by the well-tried method of seeking a second and a third independent opinion and by ordeals which use the logic of chance. Thus it is an essential aspect of divination that its revelations should be objectively verifiable as objectivity is understood in a given society. Objectivity implies public acquiescence. Divinatory verdicts must be seen and agreed to be right. Hence it is a common rule that legitimate ('white') divination must be public and formal. Secret divination is not accepted as decisive. At worst it will be suspected of being 'black', at best of being partisan and calculated to advance private interests. Provision is thus made on different lines to circumvent fraud and deception in divination. Diviners, however, are but human and



FIGURE 1. Tallensi divination: a collection of code objects.



FIGURES 2*a* to *c*. Tallensi divination: a divining session.

FIGURE 2*a*. First episode: the diviner summons his divining ancestors.

(Facing p. 414)



FIGURE 2*b*. Second episode: the diviner and consultor work out the diagnosis of the situation.



FIGURE 2*c*. Third episode: the consultor works over the diagnosis to confirm it.

known to be not infallible. Thus, there are always loopholes in a system of divination which enable the mistakes of its practitioners to be explained away and confidence in the system to be maintained.

This brings up another critical feature of divination. At some point in any system of knowledge or belief or orderly action we strike rock bottom; we have to invoke ultimate authority, be it intellectual or legal or moral. Even to say 'I saw it with my own eyes' in claim of truthfulness implies a claim to supporting authority, perhaps of expert knowledge or only of common human experience. One of the most important functions of divination lies in the authority it carries. A confirmed divinatory verdict is an authorization, a sanction emanating from the ultimate source of authority in matters that concern the occult, the occult agencies themselves, for the ritual action proposed.

Divination is an indispensable part of Tallensi religion.* To understand this it is necessary to know that their religion consists, essentially, of an elaborate system of ancestor worship. It so dominates their thought that the other occult agencies postulated by them, the mystically powerful earth or the magically efficacious medicines, for instance, are all conceived of as being under the ultimate control of the ancestors.

An ancestor must of course be dead to be qualified for the service we call worship but he must also have left descendants. The dead without descendants vanish into oblivion. Tallensi do not think of their worshipped dead—the ancestors—as denizens of a supernatural world. They are in and of this world, accessible at all times by the right ritual in the shrines set up for them in their descendants' homes. Yet they are characteristically occult in being unpredictable and recalcitrant. They are enshrined and worshipped individually, by name, never anonymously, and they are thought of as eating and drinking in the homes of their descendants. Their presence is known from what are experienced as their importunities on their descendants, the signs of which are on the one hand—and most conspicuously—the illness, misfortune and death as well as minor accidents and frustrations which they inflict, and on the other—but less conspicuously—the births, the good health, success and long life for which they claim the credit. Divination is the path by which the concealed demands and the claimed benevolence of the ancestors are ascertained—the path connecting the patent and mundane with the occult. Every Tallensi will tell you at once that such and such a happening was indubitably brought about by the ancestors. What he cannot know is which of his multitude of ancestors is the actual agent in the particular case. This is what divination reveals to him; and divination also ensures—up to a point—that he will not neglect the just claims of any ancestors.

Diviners are ordinary folk practising part-time, their main source of livelihood being farming, like everybody else's. But they are diviners by virtue of special qualifications. Only men can be diviners, since only men have the jural and ritual status to officiate in ritual. A man becomes a diviner by virtue of having in his possession a particular kind of ancestor shrine. But most mature men, though not diviners, have divining shrines and have

* I gave a preliminary account of Tallensi divination at a meeting of the Fellows held at the Centre for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences, Stanford, California, in the Spring of 1959. Among many helpful comments made on that occasion, I am particularly indebted to those of Professor Raymond Firth and those of the late Professor A. L. Kroeber.

undergone the public initiation which accompanies acquisition of such a shrine. A diviner accepts the role if he discovers by experiment that he has ability for and interest in the work. A divining shrine is characteristically the ritual domicile of maternal ancestors. It is because maternal ancestors are vitally significant for everybody that most men acquire divining shrines. Most men also have the life experience that necessitates such a step. Maternal ancestors are, in this very patrilineal society, conceptualized as particularly persecutory. A man acquires the shrine after a long series of mishaps and misfortunes by accepting these ancestors and, as Tallensi put it, making a home for them in his home. Then they can be propitiated and if he has the skill they help him to divine and to prosper. The structural rationale lies in the fact that matrilineal connexions spread in an endless web amongst the mutually independent patrilineal descent groups, and matrilineal ancestors are therefore deemed to have the ramifying ties which enable them, ideally, to be in contact with everybody's ancestors.

A divination session proceeds on the assumption that the ancestors of both client and the diviner are present or at least 'on call', and are controlling the search for a diagnosis of the client's problems.

Divination sessions are never secret. Public sessions are attended by people of many different clans. Private consultations can be listened to and even interrupted by callers or friends of either party. These take place in a room in the diviner's or the client's house. Furthermore, a diviner can be consulted by any skilled friend or kinsman on behalf of a client who is unskilled in the procedure. I should add that women cannot, of course, personally consult a diviner since they have the jural status of minors.

The occasion

Normally a household head or lineage elder goes to consult a diviner when something is wrong, when there is a crisis of any sort, or when some special undertaking is ahead (e.g. if there is illness in the family, if a wife is pregnant and near delivery, when the farming season with its many hazards is in the offing, when the young men go off on a hunting or fishing trip where accidents are not uncommon).

If one asks a man why he goes to a diviner for a private consultation he will say that he goes because he is 'worried' or because he has 'something on his mind'. The underlying attitude comes out vividly in the course of a divination session. I have often heard a client exclaim, as the divining staff leapt hither and thither: 'My enemy, show me where is my enemy.' Tallensi explain that if you are troubled it is because you have incurred 'enmity' of some ancestor by a sin of omission or commission generally assumed to be unpremeditated. Your 'enemy' is that ancestor and once you know who he is and what he demands your anxiety is allayed. Such frank admission of the ambivalence of the relationship between the living and the ancestors is characteristic. It points neatly to the psychological sources of the demarcation line between the patent and the occult in Tallensi culture.

The invariable outcome of divination is a command to offer sacrifice to the ancestors or other occult agencies. Whether defined as propitiatory or piacular or thank-offerings, they are all of the same kind and may or may not be associated with other prescriptions such as food or work taboos. That this will be the outcome is known in advance. What is not known is which particular ancestors are the protagonists in the current crisis, what animals

they demand in sacrifice, and what conduct or circumstances have occasioned these demands. If one suggests that surely an experienced elder must be able to make his own diagnosis of his situation, Tallensi say this is out of the question. Even a diviner cannot divine for himself. A man cannot be judge in his own cause. To attempt it would be not only to flout the authority of the ancestors but also to incur discredit among one's kinsfolk and friends.

Public divination is ritually obligatory on occasions of communal interest such as the eve of a festival, when a diviner is consulted in order to find out what sacrifices must be offered to ensure a propitious outcome. It is also obligatory for every death in order to ascertain the ancestral agency that caused it and to find out what ritual action must be taken in placation or expiation.

Technique

I turn now to the actual technique of divination. I must emphasize that, granted the premisses of the Tallensi religious system, and considered purely in its internal structure, this technique is as logical, rational and consistent as any non-ritual technical process. First then the diviner's equipment. It consists of a gourd rattle, a stout staff about 3 feet long with a fork at one end and iron-tipped foot, and a skin bag—the *kologo*—filled with his *kpa'an*, as it is called. This is a miscellaneous collection of articles that looks exactly like a lot of odds and ends of rubbish when poured out in a heap in front of him. In fact these bits and pieces are standard *materia oraculosa*, if I might coin a barbarism for them, that is standard code symbols, as I will presently explain.

A divining session follows a set procedure. It is a dramatic dialogue in speech, gesture and expression with the use of a specialized but not esoteric vocabulary. There is no hint of mediumship or dissociation or any other abnormal psychological state in the diviner or his client. It is a strictly professional business. Though it is intensely serious, the diviner may, as has been mentioned before, stop in the midst of consultation to exchange greetings with callers or give an order to a member of his family.

Public and private divinations follow the same pattern. For private divination a client arrives at the diviner's house, and even if they are neighbours, kin or friends, asks formally and impersonally for a consultation. This is done by placing the fee he is offering in front of the diviner. A fee must be offered in advance, but it is not fixed and however minute it is, it must be accepted. The diviner sits on a board in his room with his bag in front of him and the client sits opposite him on the floor, cross-legged in a posture of respect. The diviner claps his hands on the bag and calls *sotto voce* on his ancestors to be present. He shakes his rattle rhythmically and chants, calling his divining ancestors, to come and sit—this is a technical expression—on their divining shrine. Presently he stops to pour out his bag. (The rattle and chant, although there is no mediumship, do produce a certain frame of mind, a rhythmic mood, but the diviner is never dissociated.)

Having poured out the bag and spread out the code-objects, the diviner puts two small flat stones (the striking stones) or pieces of iron in front of himself. He continues to rattle, head turned aside, and chant, calling on his ancestors to come and divine. Presently he picks up two other flat stones (the testing stones) spits on one side of each stone, grips them together, wet against wet and throws them violently on the ground, calling to his

divining ancestors to come. This is the first use of the code and every adult male can interpret it. The stones can fall (1) both dry sides up: this means refusal, (2) both wet sides up: this means 'laughter', (3) one wet, one dry: this means acceptance. (I ignore irregular falls though all have a meaning.)

An actual case of public divination will elucidate. At the first throw the stones 'refused'. Everyone in the audience craned to look. It meant that the divining ancestor had not come (I am translating literally). The diviner cried out in annoyance, 'There is a quarrel here, there is anger here. Is it my divining ancestors who are angry and refuse to come or the client's ancestors who are angry and obstructing? If the quarrel is on my side, let the stones refuse again'. He threw them again and they again 'refused'. So he knew that his divining ancestors were holding back. He cried out in apparent protest saying, 'One more trial to see if this is really the case'. He threw. The stones 'refused'. He leaned back and addressed his divining ancestors quite casually saying, 'I know what it is. It is because of the money I used to pay my son's bride price. When I got it and consulted about it, you, divining ancestors, declared that you wished the money to be used to buy a cow dedicated to you. But I gave in to pressure and spent it on my son's marriage. That is why you have a quarrel with me and now refuse to come.' The diviner sat back, chastened. Thereupon the consultor leaned forward and addressed the diviner. 'Diviner', he said, 'your divining ancestors are fully in the right. You have done wrong. But we beg them to exercise charity and to accept the divination, so that we can go on with the consultation which is what we brought you here for.' It was a plea for the diviner's ancestors not to let their private quarrel with him obstruct the professional task before them. Now the stones were thrown again and they fell in the acceptance pattern, and the whole audience—but not the diviner—clapped hands in thanks. There followed a second throw, also successful, and the seance could start. There must always be two successful throws—a throw and a check on the first throw—before a seance can start. (Why, incidentally, did the diviner not clap his hands in gratitude? Because the theory is that he is only the spokesman, the intermediary for the divining ancestors. The theory is that the client's ancestors and the diviner's ancestors are in communication and the former express their wishes through the latter.)

If the stones 'laugh' it means provisional acquiescence. It indicates that the ancestors will not go on to the main purpose of the session until some other issue has first been cleared out of the way. It may signify a promise of joyous laughter at good fortune on the part of the client; or it may mean a threat of jeering laughter by some ancestor if the client fails to settle a ritual debt already known to him.

In the seance, the diviner grasps the forked top of his stick in one hand, and with the other continues to rattle, chanting his invocation to his divining ancestors to be present and to search diligently. He sweeps the stick hither and thither, prods among the litter of objects in front of him, and, as he does this, sings in a rhetorical, staccato recitative, naming the objects and the gestures in the special language of divination—for the code includes both the objects and a variety of sign-gestures. This is the diviner's diagnosis of the situation. It is done with a flourish but impersonally. When he reaches the end, he raps on one of the two flat stones in front of him crying out, 'Thus it is'.

The consultor has sat quietly listening and watching perhaps for a minute or two,

perhaps for 5 to 10 minutes—for the diagnostic probe can be complicated and devious. The consultor now grasps the foot of the divining staff. He holds it loosely and repeats the diviner's diagnosis. He recites the diagnosis item by item and as he does so the stick swings, stabs, picks out objects, points to his side, his abdomen, his mouth and so on. The diviner sometimes interpolates a phrase or a word to eke out the argument. It is very fast, intense, dramatic, elliptic and allusive.

The diviner's diagnosis is given in quite general terms. The items picked out come from the universe of ideas, beliefs, ritual objects and institutions, common and equally significant to everybody, that is to say, the common occult. The consultor transposes this general formula into the particulars of his own (or the client's) life history and ancestor shrines. And he checks each step in this secondary interpretation by a binary test on the two striking stones.

He puts questions as it were to the stick (often *sotto voce*): 'You mentioned a "mother", was it my own mother or my mother's mother?'—pointing to the left-hand stone for the first and the right-hand stone for the second alternative. A correct statement is vouched for by a bang of the stick on the appropriate stone, while incorrect statements or questions are ignored. The whole sequence will be repeated, elaborated, probed further, checked again by rephrasing the questions, reversing alternatives, so that the stick must strike a different stone each time for the verdict to be consistently maintained. In the course of this working out, the consultor rehearses the sacrifices he is being commanded to give, runs over the prayers he will speak and sums up the verdict. The consultor then picks up the testing stones and speaking earnestly, addresses the ancestor whose wishes have just been revealed. He says, 'Mother (or Father, or whoever it may be), you say thus and thus and thus. If this is true, let the stones show acceptance, for I submit.' He hands the stones to the diviner who spits on them, holds them out to his divining bag, invokes his divining ancestors to let the stones show acceptance, and throws them down. If they 'refuse' or 'laugh' the impediment must be sought out and the original verdict returned to later. The consultation now goes on to the next episode in exactly the same way. There may be only three or four or as many as twenty or more such units, but finally the diviner says, 'That is all', and this will be tested by the stones.

This is the way the Tallensi describe the process. Since the consultor guides the stick all the time—or if he relinquishes hold for a moment at the diviners instance, the diviner interpolates suggestions and interpretations—it is obvious that the choice of answers is being guided by the consultor himself. Yet Tallensi insist that this is not the case. They insist that neither the consultor nor the diviner knows what is going to be the outcome of the divination session. They insist that it is the ancestors who move the stick and put the words in their mouth and that the ordeal by the stones is infallible and beyond their own control. There are some very interesting problems of a psychological nature in this procedure but I can do no more here than mention them in passing. I must repeat though, that from the Tallensi point of view it is a thoroughly objective procedure.

At the end, the professional dialogue concluded, friendly greetings are exchanged for the first time between the diviner and the consultor. If it is a public occasion, his fee, often prescribed as in the case of a death (e.g. a small basket of grain, a chicken and some beer) will now be given to the diviner, who will be dismissed by a ritual leave-taking. Thus it is

not till the formal task is finished that the personal relations of the parties are permitted to emerge.

The code

Each of the material objects and the standardized gestures employed in divination has a fixed meaning attached to it by a simple rule of association or metaphorical extension which most men can interpret. Some sample code objects are:

(1) The astragalus bone of a sheep, goat or cow. This symbolizes a male progenitor and if a cow's bone, specifically a father. Pointed to in divination it generally indicates that a male ancestor is claiming attention or it may indicate that a living father's affairs are at stake.

(2) Head of a calabash ladle: a woman (e.g. a mother or wife). Implies that an ancestress is demanding attention or that a living woman's circumstances are at stake.

(3) Animal hoof of a sheep or goat, etc.: an animal of that species demanded in sacrifice, or of a past sacrifice.

(4) Fowl or guinea-fowl claw: a fowl or guinea-towl to be sacrificed, or of a past sacrifice.

(5) Animal horn: a variety of ancestral shrine in which a medicine horn is important.

(6) The hollow husk of a wild fruit: a variety of ancestral shrine that has a pot among its appurtenances.

(7) A red rag: chiefship—an issue connected with a chief, perhaps an ancestor who was a chief or promises made at a time when a chiefship was sought. (Chiefs wear red caps as their distinctive insignia of office.)

(8) The stone of a wild fruit that is never eaten except at times of famine: famine, crops will fail unless a commanded sacrifice or ritual action is performed.

(9) A fragment of the shell of a water tortoise: cool water, 'coolness of heart'—that is contentment, peace of mind is promised if the commanded sacrifices and ritual actions are performed.

The number of code objects a diviner uses varies according to his taste and practice, twenty to thirty is normal.

Some sample code gestures are:

(1) Pointing to the abdomen: a child, *in utero* or already born.

(2) Pointing to the side: a collateral kinsman.

(3) Pointing to the hand: property, possession.

(4) Slitting the throat: death.

The following sequence shows how the code is used. The consultor puts questions as if to the stick, stating them in terms of alternatives, pointing to one flat stone for alternative (*a*) and the other for (*b*). The stick chooses by striking the appropriate stone or if the question is not to the point, by remaining suspended in the consultor's hand. A sequence might run: 'You point to a woman—is it a living woman or a dead one?' (If dead): 'Is it a mother or a wife?' (If mother): 'Is it my mother or somebody else's?' (If own mother): 'Is it my mother who bore me or a distant mother?' (If distant): 'Is it my mother's mother?' (If no answer): 'Is it my mother's mother's mother?' (Answer affirmative): 'What then?'. Stick swings and points to sheep hoof. 'It is a question of a sheep.' (Answer

affirmative): 'A sheep to be sacrificed or one already sacrificed?' (To be sacrificed): 'For what reason?' (Stick points to abdomen): 'Because of a child to be conceived or already conceived?'—and so on.

Tallensi divination, it can easily be seen, is from their point of view an objective technique, almost impersonal in its procedure. It follows from the premisses of ancestor worship with its assumption of the co-existence, in a single scheme of reality, of the ancestors with the living and the corollary that communication by ritual procedure between the two sides is normal. But the technique itself conforms to the ordinary rules of logical induction and discourse within the framework of Tallensi culture. It is based on a conventional code, a kind of object and gesture dictionary of the ancestral cult and of the significant affairs of every-day life on which it impinges. It can very well be thought of as a special language. Taken in this sense it seems to me to illustrate rather well the analysis of ritual 'language' put forward by Dr Leach in the present Symposium. The revelations are of a standard pattern and are arrived at by a formalized search conducted in collaboration and dialogue by the consultant and diviner; but they are not accepted unless they are confirmed by an action approximating, one might almost say, to a throw of dice in which the outcome is left to the quasi-objective influence of chance. The outcome is to provide a person with an authoritative and legitimate, though stereotyped policy for ritual action by which to grasp, bind and incorporate into his own life-course the threatening, harmful or hopeful incidents and experiences which have caused him to seek the aid of a diviner.

As a technique, Tallensi divination, like the Tallensi language, can be learnt and used by anybody who applies himself to the task. He does not have to accept the religious and ritual implications. Though I never became adept enough at it to carry through a whole consultation, I learnt enough to be able to demonstrate it. I took the role of a client often enough to see the game from that side, too, and the revelations offered to me were invariably couched in the idioms of Tallensi culture. I was advised to offer sacrifices to the local earth shrines and to my ancestors and promised such delectable benefits as several wives and many sons if I would comply. But there are parallels in our culture to Tallensi divination and the beliefs and attitudes reflected in it. With most lay people in our society serious illness evokes anxiety no different from that which Tallensi experience in similar circumstances, and it has for us also an implication of threat from what is occult to us, namely, the mysterious forces of disease or of retribution for imprudent living. Likewise, for the layman, diagnosis of disease by the expert in medicine is quite comparable to Tallensi divination.

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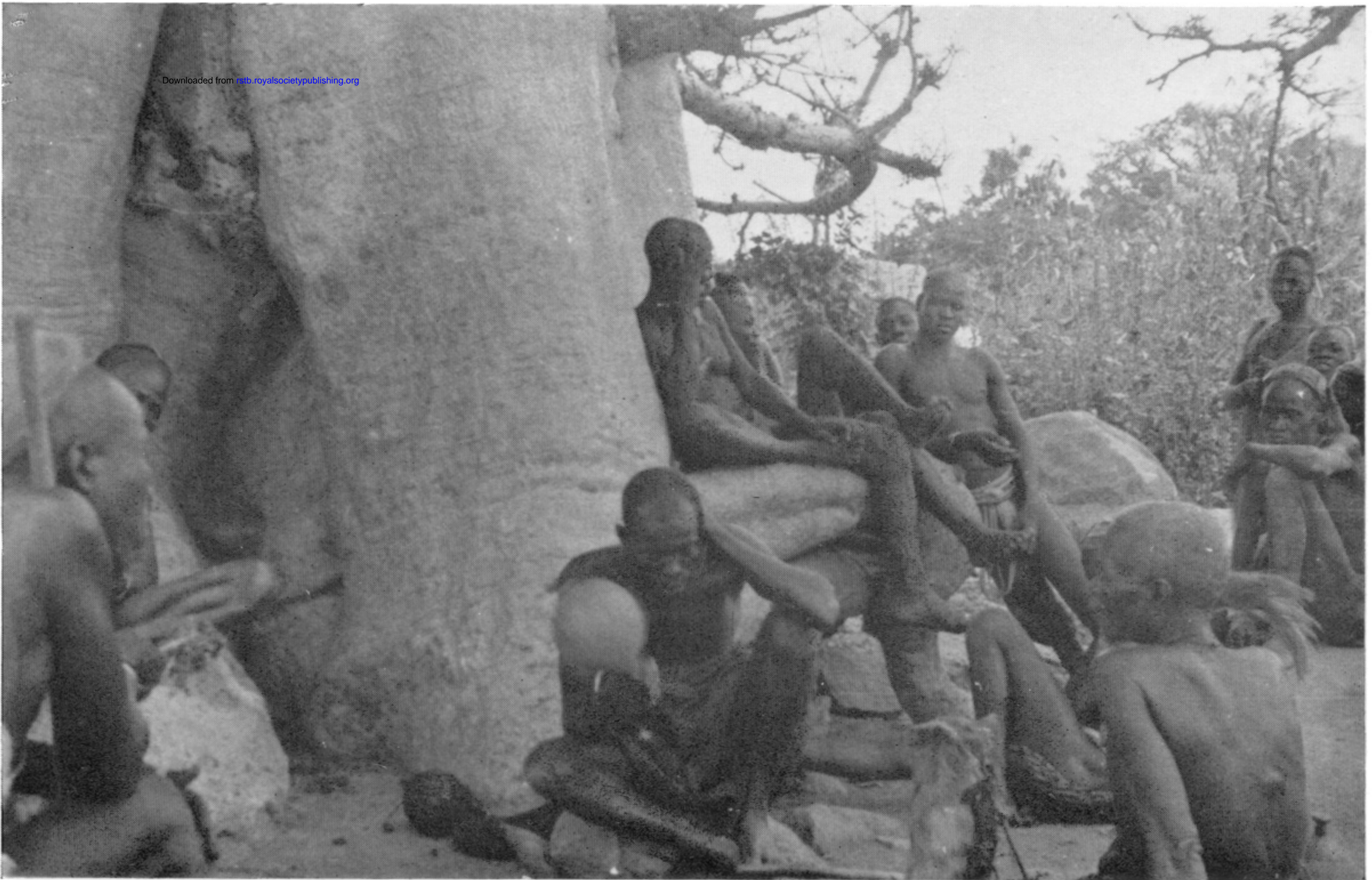
11. *Additional references*

- (1) *The Tallensi*. For the ethnographic background of the present paper see Fortes, M. 1949 *The web of kinship among the Tallensi*, Oxford University Press; 1959 *Oedipus and Job in West African religion*. Cambridge University Press.
 - (2) *Divination*. The comprehensive review of the data at that time available in Hasting's *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics*, 1911; s.v. 'Divination' is still worth consulting.
- Among recent studies, my own argument is particularly indebted to Park, G. F. 1963 Divination and its social contexts, *J. R. Anthropol. Inst.* **93**, no. 2, 195–209; and Turner, V. W. 1961 Ndembu divination: its symbolism and techniques. *Rhodes–Livingstone Papers*, no. 31.

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FIGURE 1. Tallensi divination: a collection of code objects.



FIGURES 2*a* to *c*. Tallensi divination: a divining session.

FIGURE 2*a*. First episode: the diviner summons his divining ancestors.



FIGURE 2*b*. Second episode: the diviner and consultor work out the diagnosis of the situation.



FIGURE 2c. Third episode: the consultor works over the diagnosis to confirm it.