Consulting the Poison Oracle Among the Azande

E. E. Evans-Pritchard

It is one important aspect of religion is helping believers come to know the unknown, it follows that divination is important to religion. Divination means learning about the future or about things that may be hidden. Although the word itself may be traced to divinity, which indicates its relationship to gods, the practice of divination belongs as much to magic as it does to religion proper. In this selection, E. E. Evans-Pritchard describes the Zande poison oracle benge, a substance related to rituals, and the myriad agricultural beliefs surrounding its usage. Anthropological literature has long confirmed the great importance of divination to the Azande; it is a practice that cuts across every aspect of their culture. Azande diviners frequently divine with rubbing boards and termite sticks, but for the most important decisions they consult benge by "reading" its effect on chickens.

Control over the poison oracle by older men ensures them power over young men and all women.

More importantly, control of benge in all legal cases provides Zande princes with enormous power. Indeed, the entire legal system of the Zande rests on divination-based decisions.

The late Evans-Pritchard is recognized for his extensive and outstanding anthropological work in Africa, notably in the Sudan, Congo, Ethiopia, and Kenya. He was the author of several scholarly books and articles on African cultures as well as theories of religion.

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

Oracle poison is useless unless a man possesses fowls upon which to test it, for the oracle speaks through fowls. In every Zande homestead there is a fowl house, and fowls are kept mostly with the object of subjecting them to oracular tests. As a rule they are only killed for food (and then only cocks or old hens) when an important visitor comes to the homestead, perhaps a prince’s son or perhaps a father-in-law. Eggs are not eaten but are left to hens to hatch out. Generally a Zande, unless he is a wealthy man, will not possess more than half a dozen grown fowls at the most, and many people possess none at all or perhaps a single hen which someone has given to them.

Small chickens, only two or three days old, may be used for the poison oracle, but Azande prefer them older. However, one sees fowls of all sizes at oracle consultations, from tiny chickens to half-

grown cockerels and poults. When it is possible to sell the sex of fowls Azande use only cockerels, unless they have none and a consultation is necessary at once. The best are spared for breeding purposes. Generally a man tells one of his younger sons to catch the fowls the night before a séance. Otherwise they catch them when the door of the fowl house is opened shortly after sunrise, but it is better to catch them and put them in a basket at night when they are resting.

Old men say that fully grown birds ought not to be used in oracle consultations because they are too susceptible to the poison and have a habit of dying straight away before the poison has had time to consider the matter placed before it or even to hear a full statement of the problem. On the other hand a chicken remains for a long time under the influence of the poison before it recovers or expires, so that the oracle has time to hear all the relevant details concerning the problem placed before it and to give a well-considered judgment.

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

An unmarried man will seldom be present at a séance. If he has any problems his father or uncle can act on his behalf. Moreover, only a married household is wealthy enough to possess fowls and to acquire poison and has the experience to conduct a séance properly. Senior men also say that youths are generally engaged in some illicit love affair and would probably pollute the poison if they came near it. It is particularly the province of married men with household of their own to consult the poison oracle and no occupation gives them greater pleasure. It is not merely that they are able to solve their personal problems, but also they are dealing with matters of public importance, witchcraft, sorcery, and adultery, in which their wives will be associated as witnesses of the oracle's decisions. A middle-aged Zande is happy when he has some poison and a few fowls and the company of one or two trusted friends of his own age, and he can sit down to a long session to discuss all about the indignities of his wives, his health and the health of his children, his marriage plans, his hunting and agricultural prospects, the advisability of changing his homestead, and so forth.

Poor men who do not possess poison or fowls but who are compelled for one reason or another to consult the oracle will persuade a kinsman, blood-brother, relative-in-law, or prince's deputy to consult it on their behalf. This is one of the main duties of social relationships.

Control over the poison oracle by the older men gives them great power over their juniors and it is one of the main sources of their prestige. It is possible for the older men to place the names of the youths before the poison oracle and on its declarations to bring accusations of adultery against them. Moreover, a man who is not able to afford poison is not a fully independent householder, since he is unable to initiate any important undertaking and is dependent on the good will of others to inform him about everything that concerns his health and welfare. In their dealings with youths older men are backed always by the authority of the oracle on any question that concerns their poison, who have no means of directly consulting themselves.

Women are deburred not only from operating the poison oracle but from having anything to do with it. They are not expected even to speak of it, and a man who mentions the oracle in the presence of women uses some circumspect expression. When a man is going to consult the poison oracle he says to his wife that he is going to look at his cultivations or make a similar excuse. She understands well enough what he is going to do but says nothing.

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

Occasionally very old women of good social posi 
tion have been known to operate the poison oracle, 
or at least to consult it. A well-known character of 
the present day, the mother of Prince Nygere, consults 
the poison oracle, but such persons are rare excep 
tions and are always august persons.

When we consider to what extent social life is 
regulated by the poison oracle we shall at once ap 
preciate how great an advantage men have over 
women in their ability to use it, and how being cut 
off from the main means of establishing contact with 
the mystical forces that so deeply affect human wel 
fare degrades woman's position in Zande society. I 
have little hesitation in affirming that the customary 
evictions of women from any dealings with the poi 
son oracle is the most evident symptom of their infe 
dible social position and means of maintaining it.

Close experience is necessary to conduct its business in the correct manner and to know how to interpret the 
findings of the oracle. One must know how 
many doses of poison to administer, whether the or 
acle is working properly, in what order to take the 
questions, whether to put them in a positive or neg 
ative form, how long a dose is to be held between the 
toes or in the hand while a question is being put to 
the oracle, when it ought to be jerked to stir up the 
poison, and when its time to throw it on the ground 
for final inspection. One must know how to observe 
not only whether the eyebrow frowns or does, but also the 
exact manner in which the poison affects, for while 
it is under the influence of the oracle its every move 
ement is significant to the experienced eye. Also one 
must know the phonology of ask in order to put 
the questions clearly to the oracle without error or 
ambiguity, and this is no easy task when a single 
question may be asked in a language lasting as long 
as five or ten minutes.

Everyone knows who happens at a consultation of 
the poison oracle. Even women are aware of the 
procedure. But not every man is proficient in the art, 
though most adults can prepare and question the or 
acle if necessary. Those who do boys have often pre 
pared the poison for their fathers and uncles, and 
who are members of families which frequent the 
court and constantly consult the oracle, are the most 
competent. When I have asked boys whether they 
can prepare the poison and administer it to boys 
they have often replied that they are ignorant of 
the art. Some men are very expert at questioning the or 
acle, and those who wish to consult it like to be ac 
companied by such a man.

Any man who is invited by the owner of the or 
acle poison may attend the session, but he will be ex 
pected to keep clear of the oracle if he has had 
relations with his wife or eaters of the prohibited 
food within the last few days. It is imperative that 
the man who actually prepares the poison shall 
have observed these taboos, and for this reason the owner 
of the poison, referred to in this account as the 
owner, generally asks a boy or man who is under 
taboo of nourishing to operate the oracle, since 
there can be no doubt that he has kept the taboo, be 
cause they are so reverent in matter, as for oracles. Such a 
man is always employed when as in a case of sud 
den sickness it is necessary to consult the oracle 
without warning so that there is no time for a man to 
prepare himself by observation of taboos. I shall 
refer to the man or boy who actually prepares the 
poison and administers it to loosely as the "operator." 
When I speak of the "questioner" I refer to the man 
who sits opposite to the oracle and addresses it and 
calls upon it for judgments. As he sits a few feet 
from the oracle he ought also to have observed all 
the taboos. It is possible for a man to be oracle, oper 
ation, and questioner at the same time by conducting 
the consultation of the oracle by himself, but this 
rarely, if ever, occurs. Usually there is no difficulty in 
attaining the services of an operator, since a man 
knows which of his neighbors are observing the 
taboos associated with death and vengeance. One of 
his companions who has not entested taboo food or 
bad sexual relations with women for a day or two 
before the consultation acts as questioner. If a man is 
unlucky he can address the oracle from a distance. It 
is better to take these precautions because contact of 
an unclean person with the oracle is certain to de 
stroy its potency, and even the close proximity of an 
unclean person may harm this result.

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

To guard against pollution a man generally hides his poison in the thatched roof of a hut, on the inner side, if possible, in a hut which women do not use. But this is not essential, for a woman does not know that there is poison hidden in the roof and is unlikely to come into contact with it. The owner of the poison must have kept the taboo if he wishes to take it down from the roof himself, and if he is unknown he will bring the man or boy who is to operate the oracle into the hut and indicate to him at a distance where the poison is hidden in the thatch. So good a hiding place is the thatched roof of a hut for a small packet of poison that it is often difficult for its owner himself to find it. No one may smoke hemp in a hut which judges oracle poison. However, there is always a danger of pollution and of witchcraft if the poison is kept in a domicile, and some men prefer to hide it in a hole in a tree in the bush, or even to build a small shelter and to lay it on the ground beneath. This shelter is far removed from human dwellings, and were a man to come across it in the bush he would not disturb it lest it cover some kind of lethal medicine. It is very improbable that witchcraft could discover oracle poison hidden in the bush. I have never seen oracle poison under a shelter in the bush, but I was told that it is frequently housed in this manner.

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

Special care is taken to protect a prince's oracle poison from witchcraft and pollution because a prince's oracles reveal matters of tribal importance, judge criminal and civil cases, and determine whether vengeance has been exacted for death. A prince has two or three official operators who supervise his oracle. These men must be thoroughly reliable since the fate of their master and the purity of law are in their hands. If they break a taboo the whole legal system may become corrupted and the innocent be judged guilty and the guilty be judged innocent. Moreover, a prince is at frequent pains to discover witchcraft or sorcery among his wives and retainers which might do him an injury, so that his life is endangered if the oracle is not working properly.

Control of the poison oracle in all legal cases gave the prince enormous power. No death or adultery could be legally avenged without a verdict from their oracles, so that the court was the sole medium of legal action and the king or his representative the sole source of law. Although the procedure was a mystical one it was carried out in the king's name and he was vested with judicial authority as completely as if a more common-sense system of justice had obtained.

Azande are very secretive about oracle secrets and wish no one to be present when they are inquiring about private matters unless he is a trusted friend. They do not tell any one except trusted friends that they are going to consult the oracle, and they say nothing about the consultation on their return. It frequently happens when a man is about to set out from his homestead to the place of the oracle that he is visited by someone whom he does not wish to acquaintance with his business. He does not tell the unwelcome visitor that he must hurry off to consult the oracle, but uses any pretext to get rid of him, and prefers to abandon the consultation rather than confess his intentions.

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

Eowan Phejebard • Consulting the Po

Consulting the Poison Oracle Among the Azande | 285
when the business of the day is finished. The opera-
tor does not maintain the poison till the rest of the
party arrive.
There may be only one strain or there may be sev-
eral who have questions to put to the oracle. Each
brings his fowl with him in an open-wove basket.
As it has been agreed beforehand where the oracle
consultation is to take place they know where to
forget it. As early person arrives he hands over
his basket of fowls to the operator who places it on
the ground near him. A man who is used to acting as
questioner sits opposite to, a few feet away if he
has observed the taboon, but several yards away if
he has not observed them. Other men who have not
kept the taboons remain at a greater distance.
When every one is seated they discuss in low
tones whose fowl they will take first and how the
question shall be framed. Meanwhile the operator
pours some water from the ground at his side into
his leaf cup and the cup on to the poison, which
then effervesces. He mixes the poison and water
with his finger tips into a paste of the right consis-
tency and, when inducted by the questioner, takes
one of the fowls and draws down its wings over its
legs and pins them between and under his toes. He
is seated with the fowl facing him. He takes his grass
brush, twirls it round in the poison, and folds it in
the leaf filter. He holds open the neck of the fowl and
tips the end of the filter into it and squares the filter
so that the liquid runs out of the paste into the throat
of the fowl. He holds the head of the fowl up and
down to compel it to swallow the poison.
At this point the questioner, having previously
been instructed by the owner of the fowl on the facts
which he is to put before the oracle, commences to
address the poison inside the fowl. He continues to
address it for about a couple of minutes, when a sec-
ond dose of poison is usually administered. If it is a
very small chicken two doses will suffice, but a
larger fowl will receive three doses, and I have
known a fowl to receive a fourth dose, but never
more than four. The questioner does not cease his
address to the oracle, but poses his questions again
and again in different forms, though always with the
same refrain, "If such is the case, poison oracle give
the fowl," or "If such is the case, poison oracle spare
the fowl." From time to time he interrupts his flow
of oratory to give a technical order to the operator.
He may tell him to give the fowl another dose of poio-
son or to prick it between his toes by raising and low-
ering his foot (this sits up the poison inside the fowl): When the last dose of poison has been admin-
istered and he has further addressed it, he tells the
operator to raise the fowl. The operator takes it to his
hand and, holding its legs between his fingers so
that it faces him, gives it an occasional pok back-
wards and forwards. The questioner redoubles his
oratory as though the verdict depended upon his
forensic efforts, and if the fowl is not already dead
he then, after a further burst of oratory, tells the
operator to put it on the ground. He continues to address
the poison inside the fowl while they watch its movements
on the ground.
The poison affects fowls in many ways. Occasionally
it kills them immediately after the first dose,
while they are still on the ground. This seldom hap-

dens, for normally a fowl is not seriously affected till
it is removed from the ground and jerked backwards
and forwards in the hand. Then, if it is going to die,
it goes through spasmodic scratchings of the body
and closing of the wings and combs. After several
such spasms it vomits and expires in a final seizure.
Some fowls appear quite unaffected by the poison,
and when, after being jerked backwards and for-
wards for a while, they are hung to the ground they
look around unconcernedly. Those fowls which are suf-
fected by the poison generally excrete as soon as
they are put to earth. Some fowls appear little af-
fected by the poison till put to earth, when they sud-
ddenly collapse and die.
One generally knows what the verdict is going to be after the fowl has been held in the hand for a cou-
ples of minutes. If it appears certain to you or the
operator that the bird is to die and throws it to the
ground. If it appears certain to die he does not trouble to te
big to its leg, but lays it on the earth to die. Often
when a fowl has died they draw its corpse in a semi-
circle around the poison to show it to the poison.
They then cut off a wing to use as evidence and
cover the body with green. Those fowls which sur-
vice are taken home and let loose. A fowl is not rec-
tly killed twice on the same day.
The main duty of the questioner is to see that the
oracle fully understands the question put to it and is
acquainted with all facts relevant to the problem it
is asked to solve. They address it with all the care for
detail that one observes in court cases before a
crown. This means beginning a long way back and
noting over a considerable period of time even de-
tail which might elucidate the case, linking up facts into a consistent picture of events, and the marshaling of arguments, as Azande can so brilliantly do, into a logical end closely knit web of sequences and interrelations of facts and inference. Also the questioner is careful to mention to the oracle again and again the name of the man who is consulting it, and he points him out to the oracle with his outstretched arm. He mentions also the name of his father, perhaps the name of his clan, and the name of the place where he resides, and he gives similar details of other people mentioned in the address.

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

The questioner has a switch in his hand, and while questioning the oracle beats the ground, as he sits cross-legged, in front of it. He continues to beat the ground till the end of his address. Often he will gesticulate as he makes his points, in the same manner as a man making a case in court. He sometimes plucks grass and shows it to the poison and, after explaining that there is something he does not wish it to consider, throws it behind him. Thus he tells the oracle that he does not wish it to consider the question of witchcraft but only of sorcery. Witchcraft is wrong, something irrelevant, and he casts it behind him.

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