

E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD

Consulting the Poison Oracle Among the Azande

The Zande practice of consulting a poison oracle is an outstanding example of the importance and elaboration that a form of divination may assume. With the Azande, the widespread African custom of divination by poisoning fowls reaches its apogee.

The Zande poison oracle is *benge*, a red paste which is related to strychnine. But *benge* is no mere poison—in fact, the Azande do not consider it to be a poison at all—it is a conscious supernatural substance. When fed to a chicken, *benge* does not kill the chicken because of its toxic qualities, but because of its willful decision to do so; therefore, before *benge* can make a decision as to killing or sparing a chicken, it must be apprised of all the relevant details. The Azande divine in many ways—their rubbing boards and termite sticks are frequently consulted—but for important queries and for legal decisions they consult *benge*.

Benge has a curious quality of killing about half the chickens it is applied to while sparing, for no apparent reason, the other half. Evans-Pritchard avers that neither the dosage of poison nor the health of the chicken seems related to the bird's survival. It is no wonder that *benge* is considered to be supernatural.

The Azande phrase their questions to *benge* in such a circumlocutory, ambiguous fashion that an unfavorable reply may be interpreted to be favorable, or some loophole may be found to justify asking *benge* a new series of questions leading to the desired answer.

The sociocultural involvements of the Zande poison oracle are considerable. As Evans-Pritchard indicates, control of the poison oracle is a paramount means by which old men assert their superiority over young men and over all women. The author also relates the institutional aspects of the poison oracle to marriage, status, and wealth. Furthermore, an unclean man—a man who has violated a taboo—cannot handle *benge* or even come near it. Politically, with the Zande kingship, the hegemony of the chiefs and subchiefs is buttressed by the belief that the chief's oracle is infallible; the Zande chief's oracle renders true legal decisions. In fact, the legal apparatus is based upon these oracular decisions.

The central importance of *benge* to the Azande is demonstrated by the class of questions put to it: a man may rhapsodically approach *benge* to discover the virtues of a potential wife, or he may venomously inquire as to the effect of his vengeance magic upon a witch, but he will not come to *benge* with trivial matters. The poison oracle provides important answers—answers about sickness, marriage, planting, adultery, and witchcraft. Through these answers, which are virtual assurances, much of the fear and uncertainty that attends the unknown and the future is removed.

Reprinted in excerpted form from E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Consulting the Poison Oracle," *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), Part III, Chap. 3, by permission of the author and the publishers.

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

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

Small chickens, only two or three days old, may be used for the poison oracle, but Azande prefer them older. However, one sees fowls of all sizes at oracle consultations, from tiny chickens to half-grown cockerels and pullets. When it is possible to tell the sex of fowls Azande use only cockerels, unless they have none and a consultation is necessary at once. The hens are spared for breeding purposes. Generally a man tells one of his younger sons to catch the fowls the night before a 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 roosting.

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 unwise to allow any boys other than these to come near their poison because boys cannot be relied upon to observe the taboos on meats and vegetables.

An unmarried man will seldom be present at a séance. If he has any problems his father or uncle can act on his behalf. Moreover, only a married householder is wealthy enough to possess fowls and to acquire poison and has the experience to conduct a 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 households of their own to consult the poison oracle and no occupation gives them greater pleasure. It is not merely that they are able to solve their personal problems; but also they are dealing with matters of public importance, witchcraft, sorcery, and adultery, in which their names will be associated as witnesses of the oracle's decisions. A middle-aged Zande is happy when he has some poison and a few fowls and the company of one or two trusted friends of his own age, and he can sit down to a long séance to discover all about the infidelities of his wives, his health and the health of his children, his marriage plans, his hunting and agricultural prospects, the advisability of changing his homestead, and so forth.

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

Control over the poison oracle by the older men gives them great power over their juniors and 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 juniors, who have no means of directly consulting it themselves.

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

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

When we consider to what extent social

life is regulated by the poison oracle we shall at once appreciate how great an advantage men have over women in their ability to use it, and how being cut off from the main means of establishing contact with the mystical forces that so deeply affect human welfare degrades woman's position in Zande society. I have little hesitation in affirming that the customary exclusion of women from any dealings with the poison oracle is the most evident symptom of their inferior social position and means of maintaining it.

Great experience is necessary to conduct a séance in the correct manner and to know how to interpret the findings of the oracle. One must know how many doses of poison to administer, whether the oracle is working properly, in what order to take the questions, whether to put them in a positive or negative form, how long a fowl is to be held between the toes or in the hand while a question is being put to the oracle, when it ought to be jerked to stir up the poison, and when it is time to throw it on the ground for final inspection. One must know how to observe not only whether the fowl lives or dies, but also the exact manner in which the poison affects it, for while it is under the influence of the oracle its every movement is significant to the experienced eye. Also one must know the phraseology of address in order to put 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 harangue lasting as long as five or ten minutes.

Everyone knows what 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 oracle if necessary. Those who as boys have often prepared the poison for their fathers and uncles, and who are members of families which frequent the court and constantly consult the oracle, are the most competent. When I have asked boys whether they can prepare the poison and administer it to fowls they have often replied that they are ignorant of the art. Some men are very expert at questioning the oracle, and those who wish to consult it like to be accompanied by such a man.

Any man who is invited by the owner of the oracle poison may attend the séance, but he will be expected to keep clear of the

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

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

To guard against pollution a man generally hides his poison in the thatched roof of

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

Oracle poison when not in use is kept wrapped in leaves, and at the end of a séance used poison is placed in a separate leaf-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 poison oracle. These men must be thoroughly reliable since the fate of their master and the purity of law are in their hands. If they break a taboo the whole legal system may become corrupted and the innocent be judged guilty and the guilty be judged innocent. 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.

An official consulter of a prince's oracles must also be a man of impeccable honesty, since he is given sole charge of many legal cases and tests of vengeance. He can ruin subjects of his master by fabricating oracular statements. Finally, the consulter of a prince's oracle must know how to maintain silence about his master's affairs. There is no offense more serious in the eyes of a Zande prince than "revealing the speech of the king's poison oracle." Hence the reason given for slaughtering a king's young servant at his graveside: "It is better they should die lest they reveal the speech of the king's poison oracle."

Each of these representatives of a prince supervises the oracle for about a month and then goes home to his wife and family and his place is taken by another. They need not prepare the poison themselves, though they may do so, but they supervise its preparation and bring from the prince the questions to which he desires answers, put them to the oracle, and inform the prince of its revelations. The actual preparation, in the old days, was generally performed by youths or boys who lived in a lonely hut in the bush at the back of the king's court where they had charge of the poison and the fowls. At the court of a great king like Gbudwe these boys were generally foreign captives, Moro, Munu, and so forth. At the courts of minor princes they were sons of his subjects who were acting as pages at court. Sometimes a small son of a king or prince would be in charge of these boys to see that they looked after the poison and fowls and kept the taboos. Today important princes in the old kingdom of Gbudwe maintain one or two oracle consulters, usually old men, and entrust to one of their own sons, or to a Zande boy whom they have proved worthy of trust, the task of preparing the poison. At the present time an important prince consults the oracles, either himself or through his representative, two or three times a week at least, but in the old days at the court of Gbudwe consultations were held daily.

All good oracle poison is the same, whoever owns, operates, and consults it. But its goodness depends on the care and virtue of owner, operator, and consulter. As the greatest precautions are taken with a prince's poison, it is considered more reliable than the poison of commoners. All *benge* is the same material, but people speak of "my

benge" or of "so-and-so's *benge*," and they say that the poison of one prince is absolutely reliable while that of another prince is not so reliable. They make these judgments partly on the evidence of subsequent events which prove oracles right or wrong in their statements, and partly on the verdicts of the king's oracle, which is the final authority.

Control of the poison oracle in all legal cases gave the princes 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 commonsense system of justice had obtained.

Azande are very secretive about oracle séances 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 acquaint 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 *bingba* grass he fashions a small brush to administer the poison, and from leaves he makes a filter to pour the liquid poison into the beaks of the fowls; and from other leaves he makes a cup to transfer water from the gourd to the poison when it needs to be moistened. Finally, he tears off some branches of nearby shrubs and extracts their bast to be used as cord for attaching to the legs of fowls which have survived the test so that they can be easily retrieved from the

grass when the business of the day is finished. The operator does not moisten the poison till the rest of the party arrive.

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

When 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 gourd at his side into his leaf cup and from the cup on to the poison, which then effervesces. He mixes the poison and water with his finger tips into a paste of the right consistency and, when instructed by the questioner, takes one of the fowls and draws down its wings over its legs and pins them between and under his toes. He 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 beak of the fowl and tips the end of the filter into it and squeezes the filter so that the liquid runs out of the paste into the throat of the fowl. He bobs the head of the fowl up and down to compel it to swallow the poison.

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

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

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

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

There is no stereotyped speech—no formula—in which the oracle must be addressed. As the content of each question differs from the others it is evident that this

could not be the case. Moreover, the questioner addresses the oracle for more than five minutes, if it lives as long, in a flow of words. Nevertheless, there are traditional refrains, pieces of imagery, compliments to the oracle, ways of formulating a question, and so forth which occur in every consultation. After listening to a fair number of consultations I could easily have written out suitable addresses to the oracle on sickness, marriage, and other matters most frequently inquired into.

The main duty of the questioner is to see that the oracle fully understands the question put to it and is acquainted with all facts relevant to the problem it is asked to solve. They address it with all the care for detail that one observes in court cases before a prince. This means beginning a long way back and noting over a considerable period of time every detail which might elucidate the case, linking up facts into a consistent picture of events, and the marshalling of arguments, as Azande can so brilliantly do, into a logical and 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 sentences outline the question in terms demanding an affirmative answer and end with the command, "Poison oracle kill the fowl." The next sentences outline the question in terms demanding a negative answer and end with the command, "Poison oracle spare the fowl." The consulter then takes up the question again in terms asking an affirmative answer; and so on. If a bystander considers that a relevant point has been left out he interrupts the questioner, who then makes this point.

The questioner has a switch in his hand, and while questioning the oracle beats the ground, as he sits cross-legged, in front of it. He continues to beat the ground till the end of his address. Often he will gesticulate as he makes his points, in the same manner as a man making a case in court. He sometimes plucks grass and shows it to the poison and,

after explaining that there is something he does not wish it to consider, throws it behind him. Thus he tells the oracle that he does not wish it to consider the question of witchcraft but only of sorcery. Witchcraft is *wingi*, something irrelevant, and he casts it behind him. A single example of the kind of address made to the poison oracle is cited here. A man is consulting the oracle about the girl he wishes to marry:

"Poison oracle, that woman, since I intend to marry her, she is my wife? We will make a homestead together? We shall count the years together? Poison oracle listen, kill the fowl. It is not so, mine is the weariness of piercing boils—a man pierces a boil and can eat nothing—such is the affair of that woman. I must do without her and may not marry her, poison oracle listen and spare the fowl. It is not so, poison oracle, refuse to be deceived; you are marrying her to me, she is truly my wife. I will praise this verdict of yours, poison oracle, about that affair of my wife. Straight be your utterance like Zakiri, like Moragbondi. Poison oracle kill the fowl. It is not true, poison oracle, she is not my wife; although you are as fierce as Gbudwe if you see that that woman will not be my wife; poison oracle spare the fowl. Poison oracle do not make the fowl cry out on my account, make it cry out for that woman, the daughter of so-and-so. The poison oracle sees her that she is my wife; I will count the years together with her, ten years I will praise far off your verdict, poison oracle, and say that the poison oracle told me about that wife of mine and on account of its verdict we count our years together today—if I shall speak thus, poison oracle you slay the fowl. Ah! it is not true, poison oracle, for she may not be my wife; you are the poison oracle and though you may be as fierce as Gbudwe, poison oracle you spare the fowl since I may not marry her. Poison oracle spare the fowl."

The poison oracle considers the question and is sure that it is his wife. The poison oracle goes with a roar, as goes a Banginzo in a canoe, drags out the penis of the fowl like that of a powerful male beast, overwhelms the fowl, and kills it. The poison oracle ruffles its feathers. They have handed it over to the oracle, saying that it is the oracle which must settle the case, it will recover only if the oracle permits. The poison oracle cuts the fowl *sarrrrrr*; it sees that the affair of the woman is good and therefore kills it.

Such texts as the above are very difficult to translate as there is a special phraseology in speaking to the poison oracle and in describing its action on fowls. The imagery

used is specially noteworthy. It is seldom that the oracle is addressed without analogies and circumlocutions. Thus in asking whether a man has committed adultery one frames the question in some such manner as follows:

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

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

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

illustrate the usual procedure by an example:

A

First Test. If X has committed adultery poison oracle kill the fowl. If X is innocent poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl dies.

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

Result. A valid verdict. X is guilty.

B

First Test. If X has committed adultery poison oracle kill the fowl. If X is innocent poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl lives.

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

Result. A valid verdict. X is innocent.

C

First Test. If X has committed adultery poison oracle kill the fowl. If X is innocent poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl dies.

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

Result. The verdict is contradictory and therefore invalid.

D

First Test. If X has committed adultery poison oracle kill the fowl. If X is innocent poison oracle spare the fowl. The fowl survives.

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

Result. The verdict is contradictory and therefore invalid.

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

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

Magic, Witchcraft, and Divination

long interval elapses between two tests because the first one is considered sufficient justification for commencing an undertaking, but a second test has to be made before the undertaking is far advanced, e.g., a man is betrothed to a girl and begins to pay bride-spears to her father on the authority of a single test and leaves the corroborative test till months later. But the girl will not come to live with him permanently till both tests have been made. (2) One of the lesser oracles may have been consulted earlier so that a single verdict of the poison oracle is therefore regarded as an oracular confirmation. (3) Often Azande consider a single test sufficient, especially if the oracle gives its answer decisively by killing the fowl without hesitation. They are able to economize their oracle poison by this means. For example: a man who is well consults the oracle at the beginning of a new month and is assured that he will not fall sick during it. He is satisfied with this assurance and does not waste poison by asking the oracle to confirm what it has unequivocally stated. (4) Many confirmations of verdicts are contained in the oracle's answers to other questions, e.g., a man asks whether a witch will die if a certain kinsman observes taboos of

vengeance magic. The oracle says "Yes." He then asks whether the kinsman will die during the period he is under taboos. If the oracle says "No" it confirms its previous verdict because the life of the kinsman is bound up with the accomplishment of vengeance. (5) Sometimes a single fowl is used to confirm different questions. If in answer to two different questions the oracle killed two fowls it may then be asked to spare a third fowl to confirm both its verdicts at the same time. (6) When a serious matter is not at stake Azande are sometimes content merely to know that the oracle is functioning correctly, and being assured of this, are prepared to accept its single statements and to dispense with repetitions of judgment. Thus five unconnected questions may be asked in a séance. The oracle spares fowls in answer to the first four questions and then kills a fowl in answer to the fifth question. This shows that the action of the particular bundle of poison is discriminating and therefore its first four verdicts may be assumed to be valid.

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