UNCERTAIN PERSONS IN NYOLE DIVINATION

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The posture of uncertainty and questioning in the face of misfortune has been a theme in the study of African religion since Evans-Pritchard published his study of Zande witchcraft. In one of the most famous passages in anthropological writing, he showed what kinds of questions were raised in Zande minds by events like the collapse of a granary upon people sitting in its shade (1937: 69 ff). He, and other scholars after him, called attention to a persistent feature of African conceptions about misfortune: that the nature of affliction did not specify its cause or the subsequent course of action. Choice was always necessary and divination was seen as 'a ritual means of making a choice' (Jackson 1978: 132 citing Fortes).

In this article I want to look more closely at the uncertainty which is addressed in divination. Among the Nyole of Eastern Uganda, misfortune posed questions about persons, their relations, motivations and dispositions. In divination, these questions were examined and answers proposed. Yet uncertainty was never fully resolved; persons and their afflictions were always reconsidered as events unfolded. What was important about Nyole divination was not that it provided a simple answer, but that it constituted a framework for questioning.

When Nyole went to divine, they said they were going 'to ask'. The word they used, ohwebusa, was a reflexive form also used in another context. When someone began to tremble and moan, in the way Nyole called ohusamira, indicating spirit possession, people asked (ohwebusa) 'Who are you?' The question was addressed to the possessing spirit, and the reply was of the type, 'I am Buhyera, the clan spirit of the forest' or 'I am Hamba, the big man who died here.' When Nyole said they were going 'to ask' in divination, they meant they wanted to ask the presumed agent of misfortune to reveal itself, to say who it was and what it wanted, so that the suffer-
ing might be alleviated. At the same time, they were by implication asking about the identity of the afflicted person. This is so because persons were to a large extent defined in terms of their relations to others. By proposing an imagined agent of misfortune, whether an ancestor or a living mother's brother, the parties to the divination were making an assertion about the personhood of the victim. He was a descendant of his grandfather; she was a sister's daughter from whose bridewealth a maternal uncle might expect a share. Yet as Lienhardt has suggested, African conceptions of the person and the self are not simply a matter of the social roles that an individual plays. There are private as well as public aspects of the person, hidden matters of the heart, secret motivations and desires that move people to act in particular ways. All of these, as well as the invisible manoeuvres of spirits, can be implicated in misfortune. The very complexity of persons and the hidden nature of spirit activity and human desire make for uncertainty.

Nyole, like many other African peoples, attributed physical sickness, marital problems, strange behaviour, impotence, and many kinds of failure to personalistic agents. This was not simply intellectual sport, but an often desperate attempt to resolve the suffering. If an attribution and associated treatment failed to alleviate the affliction, uncertainty would arise again. Nyole diviners and their clients knew this. In divination they tried to put uncertainty in brackets, but even during consultations, there were occasional admissions of the difficulty of formulating truths that would enable people to fully control their situations. To the uncertainty that arose because persons were complex and agents partly unknowable, was added the doubt that suffering could be mastered. People hoped but, as we shall see, they were not blindly naive.

There were two principle kinds of divination practiced in Bunyole when we did fieldwork there in 1969-71: by spirit possession and by the examination of Arabic books. 'Those of the gourd rattles' (ab'esaaasi, ab'enyengo) had working arrangements with divining spirits who spoke through them to reveal the causes of a client's misfortune. Lamuli performed calculations and consulted books of geomancy; although their technique was relatively new in Bunyole, they considered the same basic causes of misfortune as did the gourd rattle diviners. However, they tended to discover sorcery more frequently, while their counterparts of the gourd rattles more often found spirit causes of misfortune.