ETIOLOGY AND DIVINATION AMONG
THE SISALA OF NORTHERN GHANA

BY

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**Sisala Environment and Society**

The Sisala live in the savannah country of northern Ghana. They reside primarily in the Tumu district but portions live in neighbouring Upper Volta. Their villages are widely scattered through the rather densely wooded savannah which is cleared, on a rotating basis, for subsistence farming. There are two seasons, rainy and dry. Most of the farm work takes place during the former; most of the ritual activity happens during the latter.

Social organisation is based on the principle of patrilineal descent and residence is patrilocal. The Sisala people form a loose-knit association of patri-clans which are sub-divided into villages, reciprocal burial groups, lineages, compounds, houses and rooms, according to the principle of segmentation. Each smaller unit may evolve into a larger unit by the process of fission. The village is the most important political unit while the lineage is the corporate unit of production, distribution and consumption.

Sisalun-g-speakers are governed by a paramount chief, the chief of Tumu, and a series of divisional and village chiefs who were imposed on them by the Colonial government and have remained till the present alongside the traditional authority, the tintintina or custodian of the

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earth. In this system of dual governance the tinteintina performs primarily ritual functions while the chief handles the politico-judicial matters.

Economically the Sisala are horticulturalists growing guinea-corn, millet, sorghum, maize and yams as well as a variety of lesser crops. While they have fenced compound gardens, the majority of their crops are grown in bush farms from two to five miles from the village. Cattle and other livestock are kept primarily as a marriage pool and to use in ritual obligations.

Religiously, the tinteintina is custodian of the ancestors who are thought to control the fertility of the earth and the fecundity of women. They are thought to be actively concerned in the maintenance of the ethos or moral code and do so by afflicting the living.

*The Form of Divination*

The apparatus of divination includes the diviner’s shrine (vuya), a goat-skin bag (purung), in which the code-objects (vugura kpasing), the divining wand (vugura dang), two iron discs (toyangba), and the divining rattle (chika) are kept. In addition, each diviner possesses a cow-skin on which the consultation takes place.

Clients consult for a variety of reasons. Illness is the most common reason. When an affliction strikes a client or his relatives, he goes to the diviner’s room and removes the skin-bag from the wall of the hut. This is a sign that he wishes to consult (speaking before the consultation is forbidden). The diviner spreads the skin on the floor of the hut and sits facing the client. He opens the bag and removes the rattle and wand. After a ritual cleaning of the objects, he takes up the wand in his right hand and invokes the ancestors. He calls them to come and determine the cause of the affliction. Once the invocation is finished, the diviner (vugura) removes the code-objects one by one. Each code-object has two strings attached to it which are rubbed together in the palms of his hand so as to spin the object. Each object has a pair of eyes. These are the knots of the string and if they point toward the client, then the object has something to do with his problem. In this way the diviner goes through all his code-objects to determine the parameters of the client’s problem. Once this phase is complete, the diviner places the two metal discs before the client. He grasps the wand by the top and the client takes it at the bottom. The client is expected to question the ancestors, who are the real power behind the diviner, about the cause and cure of his affliction. Since the code-objects are