

Victor W. Turner
**DIVINATION AS A PHASE IN
A SOCIAL PROCESS**

The following excerpt from *The Drums of Affliction* is an especially cogent example of Victor Turner's seminal thinking about the relationship of divination to social process. Divination is seen not just as a means of diagnosing the cause of an affliction and prescribing a cure. Rather, for a society without centralized political institutions, divination is shown to be a mechanism for social redress. The Ndembu diviners have learned by experience to reduce their social system to a few basic principles, and to manipulate these until they arrive at a decision that accords with the views of the majority of their clients. Thus the diviner must take into account both the specific structure of the society and a set of moral values, and these are represented in the symbolism of divination. The symbols are mnemonics which are purposely vague and flexible so as to leave the diviner free to make a detailed interpretation of the configuration of symbols that corresponds to the diagnosis he is making of the state of relationships between his clients.

Reprinted with slight abridgments from Victor W. Turner, *The Drums of Affliction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) by permission of the author and the International African Institute.

Divination is a phase in a social process which begins with a person's death or illness, or with reproductive trouble, or with misfortune at hunting. Informal or formal discussion in the kinship or local group of the victim leads to the decision to consult a diviner. The actual consultation or seance, attended by the victim's kin and/or neighbours, is the central episode in the process. It is followed by remedial action according to the diviner's verdict, action which may consist of the destruction or expulsion of a sorcerer/witch, or of the performance of ritual by cult specialists to propitiate or exorcise particular manifestations of shades, or of the application of medicines according to the diviner's prescription by a leech or medicine man.

Death, disease and misfortune are usually ascribed to tensions in the local kin group, expressed as personal grudges charged with the mystical power of sorcery or witchcraft, or as beliefs in the punitive action of ancestor spirits. Diviners try to elicit from their

clients responses which give them clues to the current tensions in their groups of origin. Divination, therefore, becomes a form of social analysis, in the course of which hidden conflicts are revealed so that they may be dealt with by traditional and institutionalized procedures. It is in the light of this function of divination as a mechanism of social redress that we must consider its symbolism, the social composition of its consultative sessions, and its procedures of interrogation.

We must always remember that the standards against which social harmony and disharmony are assessed are those of Ndembu culture and not of Western social science. They are those of a society which, possessing only a rudimentary technology and limited empirical skills and knowledge, consequently has a low degree of control over its material environment. It is a society highly vulnerable to natural disasters, such as disease, infant mortality, and intermittent food shortages. Furthermore, its ethical yardsticks are those of a community composed of small

residential groups of close kin. Since kinship guides co-residence and confers rights to succeed to office and inherit property, the major problems of Ndembu society bear on the maintenance of good relations between kin, and on the reduction of competition and rivalry between them. Furthermore, since persons of incompatible temperaments and characters are frequently forced into daily propinquity by kinship norms which enjoin respect and co-operation among them, inter-personal hostilities tend to develop that are forbidden direct expression. Hidden grudges (*yitela*) rankle and grow, as Ndembu are well aware. In the idiom of Ndembu culture these grudges are associated with the mystical power of sorcery/witchcraft.

Ndembu themselves list jealousy, envy, greed, pride, anger, lust, and the desire to steal as causes of discord in group life, and these vices are by no means unfamiliar to us. Nevertheless, these symptoms of a disordered human nature spring from a specific social structure. In their attempts to diminish the disastrous consequences of these "deadly sins" in social life, Ndembu bring into operation institutionalized mechanisms of redress that are ordered towards the maintenance of that social structure. Divination, as we have seen, is one of those mechanisms, and in it we can observe many idiosyncratic features.

In the first place, the diviner clearly knows that he is investigating within a social context of a particular type. He first establishes the location of the Senior Chief's area, then that of the Sub-chief's, then the vicinage, and finally the village of the victim. Each of these political units has its own social characteristics—its fractional divisions, its inter-village rivalries, its dominant personalities, its nucleated and dispersed groups of kindred—each possessing a history of settlement or migration. An experienced diviner will be familiar with the contemporary state of these political systems from previous consultations and from the voluminous gossip of wayfarers. Next he finds out the relationship between the victim and those who have come to consult him. He is assisted in this task by his knowledge of the categories of persons who typically make up the personnel of a village: the victim's matrilineal kin, his patrilineal kin, his affines, and unrelated persons. He finds out the victim's relationship to the headman, and he then focuses his attention on the headman's matrilineage, and discovers into how many sub-lineages it may be segmented.

By the time he has finished his interroga-

tion, he has a complete picture of the current structure of the village, and of the position occupied in it by the victim and by those who came to consult him. Since it is common for representatives of each of its important segments, as well as affines of members of its matrilineal nucleus, to visit a diviner in the event of an important man's death, and since these representatives may not make the same responses to key questions, the diviner does not have to look far for indications of structural cleavages in the village. Diviners are also aware that there is a general association between the kind of misfortune about which he is consulted, the sex of the victim, the composition of the group of clients, and the size and structure of the political or residential unit from which they come. Thus only a few close kin or affines will normally consult a diviner about a woman's barrenness or a hunter's bad luck. But a large party, representative of all segments of a Sub-chiefdom, will come to him when a Sub-chief dies. This association does not always hold true, however, for the death or even illness of a child may sometimes be taken as the occasion to bring into the open the dominant cleavage in a large village if the time is felt to be ripe. But diviners have learnt by experience—their own and their society's, incorporated in divinatory procedure and symbolism—to reduce their social system to a few basic principles and factors, and to juggle with these until they arrive at a decision that accords with the view of the majority of their clients at any given consultation.

They are guided, however, not by an objective analysis of the social structure, but rather by an intuition into what is just and fitting in terms both of Ndembu moral values and an ethical code which would be recognized as valid by all human groups. Just as Africans have been shown to operate in their judicial processes with the universally recognized concept of the "reasonable man," or "man of sense," so do they operate in their divinatory processes with the universally recognized concept of the "good man" or "moral man," *muntu wamuwahi*. This is the man who bears no grudges, who is without jealousy, envy, pride, anger, covetousness, lust, greed, etc., and who honours his kinship obligations. Such a man is open, he has "a white liver," he has nothing to conceal from anyone, he does not curse his fellows, he respects and remembers his ancestors. The diviner looks for sorcerers and witches among those who do not measure up to this standard of morality. Indeed, he looks for them among the positive transgressors,

among those whom his clients admit to be wrongdoers or "slippery customers." In the cases of illness, infertility, and bad luck at hunting, he applies the same measure of the "moral man" to individuals, although he also applies the yardstick of the "moral group," which lives in mutual amity and collectively reveres its ancestors and respects its political authorities. But here it would seem he is on the look out not so much for "mortal sins" as for "venial sins," for grudges that have not grown murderous, for offences that may yet be forgiven, for quarrels that have not yet split up a group.

A sinner (*mukwanshidi*) is defined by Ndembu as "one who has ill feeling for other people (*mukwanshidi watiyang'a kutama nawakwawa antu*)." *Kutama*, "to be bad, evil, unpleasant, ugly," is linked with symbolism of blackness, darkness, death, sterility, and night in Ndembu ritual. It is the opposite of *ku-waha*, "to be good, morally upright, pleasant, beautiful." It is also linked with witchcraft/sorcery, theft, adulterous lust, and murder. *Ku-tana* is associated with "secret things" (*yiswamu*), with the concealment of thoughts or possessions from others. What is "good," for Ndembu, is the open, the public, the unconcealed, the sincere. A man is said to be "good" when he performs his duties from "the liver," not from calculated policy with a show of outward politeness under which malice is concealed. A man is bad when there is a marked inconsistency, or disparity, between his public behaviour and his private thoughts and feelings. The former is outwardly correct, but it conceals malice and envy. Thus the hypocrite is the real sinner. We find in the diviner's basket a representation of the weeping hypocrite (*Katwambimbi*), and several references to the duplicity of "bad" people, i.e. of the witches and sorcerers.

Thus the diviner has to take into account both the specific structure of Ndembu society and a set of moral values and norms. Both these referents are represented in the symbolism of divination. The symbols are mnemonics, reminders of certain general rubrics of Ndembu culture, within which the diviner can classify the specific instance of behaviour that he is considering. Moreover, they have to be of such a nature as to lend themselves to configurational analysis. It is the constellation of symbols rather than the individual symbol which forms the typical unit of interpretation. A symbol may appear as a substantive, and in this role it may possess, say, half a dozen basic senses. By noting the reactions of the clients and at-

tenders, the diviner can make a guess, or "formulate a hypothesis," which will enable him to establish the particular sense of the substantival symbol: he can then allocate senses to the modifiers. Here the vagueness and flexibility of the series of referents of each symbol leave him free to make a detailed interpretation of the configuration of symbols corresponding to the diagnosis he is making of the state of relationships between his clients and the deceased, and between the living kin concerned in the matter. And once he has established a *chidimbu*, a definite point of divination, and obtained agreement on its veracity or likelihood, he has a point of departure for further enquiry, something firm to go on. He may then deduce logical consequences from the *chidimbu*, regarded as a set of premises. Furthermore, he has established a certain psychological ascendancy over his audience, so that they tend to become less guarded in their replies, for with growing credulity in his divinatory powers they become more eager to give him the hard data he requires. I believe that this is one of the reasons why a basket-diviner tries to find the name of the deceased quite early in the seance. Diviners, as we have seen, have learnt that the vast majority of Ndembu names can be classified under relatively few main heads—"water," "hoofed animals," "chieftainship," etc., and after the manner of the English party game, "Twenty Questions," they can quickly proceed from the general to the particular. In a society not specially remarkable for its power of abstract thinking, the diviner's ability to do this must appear little short of miraculous. When the diviner names the deceased, therefore, he has won the credulity of his audience to such an extent that he can elicit key information without much difficulty. In other words, the logician is felt to be a magician.

It may be said in conclusion that the diviner occupies a central position with reference to several fields of social and cultural relationships. He acts as a mechanism of redress and social adjustment in the field of local descent groups, since he locates areas and points of tension in their contemporary structures. Furthermore, he exonerates or accuses individuals in those groups in terms of a system of moral norms. Since he operates in emotionally charged situations, such norms are restated in a striking and memorable fashion. Thus he may be said to play a vital role in upholding tribal morality. Moral law is most vividly made known through its breach. Finally, the diviner's role is pivotal to the system of rituals of affliction and anti-

INTERPRETATIONS OF MAGIC, WITCHCRAFT, AND DIVINATION

376

witchcraft/sorcery rituals, since he decides what kind of ritual should be performed in a given instance, when it should be performed, and sometimes who should perform it. Since diviners are consulted on many occasions, it

is clear that their role as upholders of tribal morality and rectifiers of disturbed social relationships—both structural and contingent—is a vital one in a society without centralized political institutions.