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Review: The title of this published lecture barely does justice to its contents. On the one hand the publication gives a detailed account of its subject, namely oracles and sacrifices among peoples of the west African savanna, in particular among the Balsa in northern Ghana and the Lyela in Burkina Faso. On the other hand the account is a mature reflection relating to research spread over many years and makes significant methodological points concerning participant observation.

First then, the subject matter is presented on the basis of field notes and a series of extremely informative photographs. In the case of the Balsa diviners the main source is a series of participatory experiences with diviners, while in the case of the Lyela the focus is on the interpretation of sand oracles. The author emphasises that the religious specialists involved should not be miscategorised as sorcerers or medicine men. Moreover the purpose, even in divination, is not prediction, though there may be a subordinate predictive element. The central purpose lies in the interpretation of the individual's situation. The enquiry is usually made when there is a problem or an outstanding decision. The Balsa diviner himself says very little but makes use of a forked stick which is used to identify various objects and parts of the body. The combination of associations then lies largely with the client. After the possibilities have been considered, it is usual for one or more sacrifices of an animal or a fowl to be prescribed. The sacrifices are made to the ancestors by the pouring of blood, after which the flesh is shared and eaten. Lyela diviners use sand oracles, an extensive pattern of symbols formed on a flat sand surface over which mice are allowed to run, leaving tracks which suggest particular combinations. A number of these sand oracles are illustrated and analysed in detail, the resultant catalogue of items giving a vivid impression of the world view of the Lyela. Methodologically, the study is of particular interest because of the reflections concerning participant observation. Schott rejects both post-modernist subjectivism and the limiting "scientific approach" called for by Robert Aunger in his article "On ethnography - storytelling or science?" (Current Anthropology 36,1, Feb. 1995, 97-130). He calls for a combination of participant

observation and contextual information gathering in order to gather reliable knowledge. In the case of the Lyela divination technique, for example, the assembling of detailed information concerning the code of symbols drawn in the sand provides a stable base of information. The Balsa divination sessions follow a pattern which gradually becomes recognisable because of the repetition of actions and words. When using participant observation the resulting field notes may require additional elucidation through later questioning, and this too stabilises the information. Schott refers occasionally to interpreters, who are probably an essential aid for investigators funded for relatively short research operations. It is not always clear how many languages were involved in the chain of interpretation. On the other hand he contrasts his field experience positively with that of a Catholic priest, who spoke the language, Buli, fluently, and whose task was to study religious practices with a view to effective coordination with the Christian faith. Unfortunately for him, though typically, the diviner prescribed that he should sacrifice a sheep to his father, at which point the priest gave up his investigation. In the case of the Balsa therefore, the investigator may be drawn into a more complex situation. Schott's experience in consulting the diviner led him from a relatively passive form of participant observation into active participation, that is, from being a "participant observer" he became an "observant participant" (p.21, "beobachtender Teilnehmer"). This shift is of particular interest to the reviewer who has been using the double terminology "participant observation / observant participation" (teilnehmende Beobachtung / beobachtende Teilnahme) for many years in teaching on methods in the study of religions. Once again we see how close the disciplines of ethnology (anthropology) and the study of religions are. The nature of observant participation, and what actions are required, of course vary from situation to situation. As Schott notes, there is an ethical question about what the primary participants are being led to believe about the intentions of the investigator. There may also be an ethical question for the investigator about the consistency of his or her own observant-participant acts with his or her own general behaviour in life. This range of possible behaviour for the investigator is illustrated by the fact that in 1966 Schott was a passive participant observer, and in 1974 he became an active observant participant in that, following the instructions of the diviner he performed an animal sacrifice for his ancestors. This in turn led to further possibilities of understanding the consequent social activities.

In conclusion we may regard this presentation not only as an extremely valuable study of the activities of diviners among two west African peoples but also as a fascinating reflection on the gradual development of an anthropologist's method in the field. The methodological reflections may appear unfashionable to some, but to others they will seem judicious and well-balanced.

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