

**The Future in the Past:**  
**Belief in Magical Divination and Other Methods of**  
**Prophecy Among the Archaic and Classical Greeks**  
**and Among the Zulu of South Africa during the Late**  
**Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Magic and the supernatural have always been fascinating topics for investigation, none more so than the belief in prophecy. Actually being able to predict future occurrences, sometimes long before they take place, is certainly a desirable ability, and so naturally it was something that was much sought after in ancient Greece and amongst the Zulu people of South Africa. This is the domain of this dissertation—belief in the power of divination and how this belief could appear to be interrelated between two distinct peoples who are separated not only by the passage of time and their geographical locations, but also by socio-economic changes like industrialization and globalisation.

The beliefs of both societies in this particular area are sometimes strikingly similar, especially in how each group understood such esoteric notions as the human soul and the afterlife or underworld. The function of magic in these cultures is also of importance, since divination is almost always classed as a magical activity. The relative closeness to each other of their metaphysical knowledge allows a closer study of the figure of the diviner or prophet, more specifically who it was that could become a diviner and the reasons for this 'calling'. Several examples like Teiresias, the blind seer, are also useful in demonstrating certain beliefs and patterns.

The major part of this dissertation deals with certain ritual practices of divining. Although there exist many variations on a theme, the most important forms studied here are dreams, oracles, oionomancy (divining by understanding the song or flight of birds) and necromancy (divining with the aid of the spirits of the dead). The method of divining by studying one's dreams is a universal constant and seems to take place

in all cultures, making the practice useful for the purposes of comparative study. In terms of oracles, I contend that oracular divination is not a uniquely ancient form, but can be clearly seen in certain elements of the practice of Zulu divining, especially in the work of the *abemilozi* (diviners working with familiar spirits). Because of these similarities it is quite difficult to maintain that oracular divination as occurred in ancient Greece, is not also practiced among the Zulu to some extent. Birds have always held a certain fascination for people and so it is not surprising that they are also used for divining. For the Greeks they could herald the favour of the gods, while the Zulu made use of them mostly for foretelling changes in the weather. Finally, necromancy because of its connection with ghosts and the dead was often frowned upon, but for both the Greeks and the Zulu it was one of the most powerful methods of divining because it was the spirits, who had already crossed to the other side and so were believed to have access to supernatural knowledge, that were thought to be able to answer the questions posed by the diviner.

Most importantly I conclude that there is an indication that the souls of these two peoples were close to each other. The beliefs and the manner in which they go about establishing, using and confirming them are much the same for the ancient Greeks and the Zulu, despite the fact that they are separated by time, space and socio-economic context. In all, the only real difference is that the Greeks came to later explore science as another knowledge system. For the Zulu, one system was enough.

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### **LIST OF SPECIAL ABBREVIATIONS.**

Please note that all ancient sources have been referenced in accordance with the standard set by Spawforth, A. & Hornblower, S. (eds.) (1996) *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. (Oxford).

The following additional abbreviations were employed in this dissertation:

**LSJ** Liddell and Scott. (1916, Ninth Edition) *A Lexicon Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*. (Oxford)

**DSM** American Psychiatric Association. (1980) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition*. (Washington, D. C.)

**Chapter I:**

**An Introduction On Comparing Diviners**

**NEO:** So is this the same oracle that made the, uh, prophecy?

**MORPHEUS:** Yes. She's very old. She's been with us since the beginning.

**NEO:** The beginning?

**MORPHEUS:** Of the Resistance.

**NEO:** And she knows what? Everything?

**MORPHEUS:** She would say she knows enough.

**NEO:** How does she know?

**MORPHEUS:** She is a true psychic. She sees beyond the relativity of time. For her  
there is no past, present or future. There is only what is.

**NEO:** And she's never wrong?

**MORPHEUS:** Don't think of it in terms of right and wrong. She is a guide, Neo. She  
can help you find the path.

Full script of the *The Matrix*. (1997) from  
[http://www.hundland.com/scripts/TheMatrix\\_1997.txt](http://www.hundland.com/scripts/TheMatrix_1997.txt)



*The Matrix* is a film that provides fodder for several different arguments, one of which concerns the perception of the real and the unreal, the rational and the irrational. In the film these perceptions have been so skewed for the main character, Neo, that he begins with no idea of what the true situation is. Yet even this high-tech world of virtual existence has an oracle, a soothsayer, fortune-teller, or *diviner*. The Oracle is said to see ‘beyond the relativity of time’, and it is she who provides each of the characters in the story with *complete* knowledge of their particular situation (although they do not realize it at the time) because of the way in which these men and women—the diviners—straddle the borders between the real and the unreal in our universe.

*Diviner, seer, prophet, oracle, shaman.* Are they all the same—simply a collection of elegant words used to do nothing more than identify a fortune-teller, or someone who can apparently see parts of the future? Peek (1991: 2) states that

‘divining processes are diverse, but all follow set routines by which otherwise inaccessible information is obtained. Some type of device is usually employed... Sometimes the diviner’s body becomes the vehicle of communication through spirit possession. Some diviners operate self-explanatory mechanisms that reveal answers; other systems require the diviner to interpret cryptic metaphoric messages.’

Perhaps then they *are* all just fortune-tellers. Barring the shaman, I would argue that all of the others named are diviners—they utilize something<sup>1</sup> in order to make pronouncements concerning future events and/or the resolution of various problems. I separate the shaman because, he/she on the other hand, is closer to the ancient Greek γοής, (‘a composite figure that combines ecstasy with ritual lament, healing and divination’, Graf 1997: 24) in terms of the power that he/she was purported to wield. In fact Mircea Eliade (1970: 5) calls shamanism a ‘magical specialty’, which possesses

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<sup>1</sup> There are many different ‘processes’ of divining, as is noted by Peek (1991: 2).

its own idiosyncrasies like magical flight (in addition to divination). Although the word 'shaman' has been used as an umbrella term to refer to any 'primitive' medicine man, it really refers to a specific group of Siberians, who were first believed to possess these magical abilities (Eliade 1970: 3-5).

Throughout history the place of the diviner has been much the same. In this introduction I will try to set out the broader issues and concepts that are necessary to understand the phenomenon of divination as it occurred amongst the Zulu and the Greeks. Because of this, I will be utilizing several examples that are not taken from my previously established time period (archaic and classical), in order to provide the proper clarification of the scope of this area of investigation. This of course means that since divination is a magical practice, the notion of magic may also receive some attention. Perceived as outsiders, beings not of this reality, because of their closeness to the spirit realm, diviners have constantly been sidelined and feared, only to be called upon in times of strife. The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, in lamenting his situation (thanks to prophesying doom and dread to his own people), provides a striking portrait of what it was like in antiquity as a diviner:

'I am a laughing-stock all day long,  
they all make fun of me.  
For whenever I speak, I have to howl  
and proclaim, "Violence and ruin!"  
For me, Yahweh's word [the gift of prophecy] has been the cause  
of insult and derision all day long.  
I would say to myself, "I will not think about him,  
I will not speak in his name any more."  
but then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart,  
imprisoned in my bones ['possession' by the spirit of Yahweh].' (Jer. 20: 7-9  
From *The New Jerusalem Bible, Standard Edition*.)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For future reference, all translations of ancient Greek texts are my own, unless otherwise indicated. The translators listed in the 'Bibliography of Ancient Sources' (p. 133) are supplied as a guide to assist

In most cases—for example, the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, who both recorded their visions as poetry<sup>3</sup>—the diviner's knowledge is often imparted in a suitably outlandish format, making it impossible for it to make sense immediately, and only adding to his/her strangeness. E. R. Dodds (1951: 102) writes, 'Man shares with a few others of the higher mammals the curious privilege of citizenship in two worlds.' To put it another way, he too, like the diviners of old, noticed that human beings exist in a world of the real and the unreal, the rational world of our everyday existence, and the irrational (outlandish) world of our spirits, souls and dreams. The diviner is more closely attuned to both of these worlds, particularly that of the spirit. It is because of this that the diviner is able to receive and interpret what he/she believes are messages from gods, daemons or ancestral spirits. J. W. Fernandez (1991: 220) posits a similar notion:

'In short, diviners, in my view, are ones who exceptionally sensitively mediate between these two essential ways of human knowing: primary process and secondary process.<sup>4</sup> I personally would not wish to overemphasize the mysterious elements in the "cryptic potency" of diviners. They simply give more credence to primary process thinking than is normal in our world, where secondary process thinking holds sway for a variety of good and bad reasons.'

Peek (1991: 194) calls divination a 'non-normal mode of cognition', whilst believing that 'a divination system is often the primary institutional means of articulating the epistemology of a people' (1991: 2). Therefore, divination is both the norm and the extreme in a society, since it is the way in which the people formulate their collective

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readers in locating the Greek text that I employed. The translators of any Latin texts are indicated with the translations, which are provided in English only.

<sup>3</sup> For examples, see Isaiah 7: 18-25 and Ezekiel 1: 1-28.

<sup>4</sup> Psychoanalytic theory divides human 'thought' into primary and secondary processes, with the former being the irrational and imaginative part of our understanding, and the latter forming the more logical and analytical aspects. (Reber 1995: 596, 696)



knowledge but is reliant upon perceived supernatural forces to obtain this knowledge. Furthermore, Peek (1991: 205) believes that the ritual elements involved in any attempt at divination are what removes divining from the secondary processes, 'in order to change their [the participants'] minds because their current understanding of the situation is inadequate.' In other words, the dramatization of divining encourages people to think more 'laterally' than they usually would. The Roman epic poet Lucan (5. 116-161, tr. Braund 1999) in fact provides one example in which a young priestess named Phemonoe actually faked an ecstatic trance when forced to enter the sacred sanctuary by the general Appius. She does this because she fears for her life (at the hands of Appius) and for her mind (which might disintegrate when she is possessed by the god). Lucan explains this by saying that:

'Because, if the god enters any breast,  
an early death is the penalty of taking in the deity,  
or the reward; because the human framework falls apart  
under frenzy's goad and surge, and the beatings of the gods  
shake their brittle lives...' (Lucan 5. 116-120, tr. Braund 1999).

This entire episode, occurring in the fifth book of Lucan's poem of the war between Caesar and Pompey, is cast in the literary technique of the man whom Quintilian (10. 1. 90) said was more useful for orators to mimic than for poets, due to the rhetorical nature of his style. Although the result of a divining session *is* the word of one's god or spirits, and is therefore true and correct, the answer received may not necessarily be entirely logical, or according to Lucan's tale, may not be from the gods at all!<sup>5</sup> Finally, this passage is particularly important because it reports something that seems to have occurred rarely in antiquity, namely the death of someone through mantic inspiration

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Appius eventually forced the priestess to commune with the god, and she did die from the experience.

(although Lucan's account is a fiction).

It is apparently with the advent of the Hippocratic text called *On the Sacred Disease*, that we find the first time in Greek writing that a belief is labeled as 'magical' (Tambiah 1990: 9). This is important because it indicates not only that a division was beginning to form between 'science' and 'religion', but also indicates the pronouncement of something as *irrational*, or in light of the earlier extract from Lucan, a tendency to view the art of magic as a fiction when it had once received the greatest respect. The author made this comment concerning the validity of the methods for treating epilepsy:

'But my opinion of the men who first thought this disease to be sacred is that they are like the mages, purifiers, cheats and quacks of our day, and who pretend to be exceedingly pious and to have much knowledge. And so being helpless, they disguised their lack of a cure and hid behind the religious, so as to not show their ignorance, and named the disease a sacred one.'

Ἔμοι δὲ δοκέουσιν οἱ πρῶτοι τοῦτο τὸ νόσημα ἱερώσαντες τοιοῦτοι εἶναι ἄνθρωποι οἷοι καὶ νῦν εἰσι μάγοι τε καὶ καθάρται καὶ ἀγύρται καὶ ἀλαζόνες, οὗτοι δὲ καὶ προσποιέονται σφόδρα θεοσεβέες εἶναι καὶ πλέον τι εἰδέναι. Οὗτοι τοίνυν παραμπεχόμενοι καὶ προβαλλόμενοι τὸ θεῖον τῆς ἀμηχανίης τοῦ μὴ ἔχειν ὃ τι προσενέγκαντες ὠφελήσουσι, καὶ ὥς μὴ κατὰδηλοι ἔωσιν οὐδὲν ἐπιστάμενοι, ἱερὸν ἐνόμισαν τοῦτο τὸ πάθος εἶναι... (Hippoc. *Morb. Sacr.* 2. 1-10 [Jones])

Before the advent of science in ancient Greece, the Greeks were tolerant of most beliefs and philosophies. Now declaring the rational and the irrational sparks argument and controversy among a people, with some agreeing with decisions based on logic and reasoning, and others calling it all blasphemous and an affront to the gods themselves. Quoting Jon Elster's *Sour Grapes*, Tambiah (1990: 118) illustrates that 'consistency, in fact, is what rationality in the thin sense is all about; consistency within the belief system; consistency within the system of desires; and consistency between beliefs and desires on the one hand and the action for which they are reasons on the other hand.'

However, in a broader sense, ‘acting rationally means acting consistently on beliefs and desires that are not only consistent, but also rational’ (Tambiah 1990: 118). Then we must know what ‘rational’ is in order to proceed. Philosophically, the concept of rationality is based upon rules and requirements like necessity and universality. What does all this mean? The classical model conceives of rationality in terms of logic.

What of the sex of the diviner? Was masculinity or femininity an issue when it came to selecting someone to perform as the voice of the gods on earth? Two of the earliest diviners in Greek literature are Calchas and Cassandra, the former a man and the latter a woman. Both are mentioned in Homer’s *Iliad* (Calchas is identified as one who can read the flight of birds at *Il.* 1. 69. Cassandra is mentioned twice in the *Iliad*, at 13. 366 and 24. 699, but neither instance testifies to her mantic capabilities) and both are equally gifted,<sup>6</sup> although Cassandra labours under Apollo’s unfortunate curse that none will believe her words. A third diviner of great reputation was Teiresias, an ancient diviner who was also immortalized by Homer (*Od.* 11. 90-96, 138-149). This would seem to indicate that in ancient Greece one’s sex had little or nothing to do with one’s ability to divine.

In discussing the Oracle, Morpheus tells Neo, ‘Don’t think of it in terms of right and wrong. She [the Oracle] is a guide, Neo. She can help you to find the path.’ This is a point made by many authors, including Mircea Eliade (1970: 182-184), who believes that diviners not only interpret messages from the gods or spirits, but also function as guides—soul guides or psychopomps or dream guides. In discussing Greek oracles,

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<sup>6</sup> Calchas is noted for his ability as a diviner, but Cassandra is only mentioned as one of King Priam’s daughters. However, in other sources like the plays of Aeschylus (the *Agamemnon* and the *Troiaadae* for example) she is described with mantic powers, and even foresees her own demise (*Ag.* 1072-1347).



Dodds (1973: 177 n. 3) also brought up this idea: 'The primary function of a Greek oracle was to *advise* [Dodds' italics], not to predict: Apollo was not a fortune-teller.' In Greek religion the gods were in fact thought to constantly provide signs to their faithful. Thus, as Burkert (1985: 111) says, 'to doubt the arts of divination is to fall under suspicion of godlessness.' This is true of many African societies as well, where oracles and diviners are consulted when problems arise (e. g. an illness, or a run of bad luck indicating witchcraft) and when some sort of sign appears. Instead of their being asked questions like, what is going to happen next week? they are rather questioned on issues like whether travel at a particular time would be safe, or why a crop could have failed.

For this study of the phenomenon of divination, I intend to make a two-fold investigation, looking both at divining in ancient Greek society, and in the 'traditional' society of the local Zulu people. In doing this I hope to discover some points of congruence (or difference) which may prove useful either to furthering our knowledge of Greek religion, or to increasing our understanding of local belief systems. But what exactly do I mean by 'traditional' in this context? Ntshangase (2000: 4) asks a similar question, arguing that it depends entirely upon whether one approaches the discussion from a Eurocentric or an Afrocentric point of view. He continues, writing that through Eurocentric eyes, the word 'traditional' in the phrase 'traditional medicine', implies that this type of medicine is 'primitive', whereas an Afrocentrist sees it as championing the 'cultural and customary practices of the Zulu nation'. I shall be investigating divination as something with its origins in historical Zulu custom.

In terms of the practice of Greek divination, I shall concentrate mainly on evidence deriving from the archaic and classical periods of Greek history, although some works

by later authors will also be used to further this study because they make use of earlier accounts or discuss historical occasions on which some sort of divination took place. 'Tradition' was something of great importance to the early Greeks as well, for every oracle and diviner made at least some attempt at indicating or 'proving' the *antiquity* of their so-called powers and abilities. The Pythian prophetess at Delphi is just one such example, as is seen in the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus. Here, the prophetess attempts to make contact with Apollo on behalf of the suppliant Orestes, who seeks to be cleansed of the blood of his mother, Clytemnestra, so that the Furies will abate in their assaults upon him. She begins by invoking her predecessors:

'First, in this my prayer, I give the place of chiefest honour among the gods to the first prophet, Earth; and after her to Themis; for she, as is told, took second this oracular seat of her mother.'

Πρῶτον μὲν εὐχῇ τῇδε πρεσβεύω θεῶν  
τὴν πρωτόμαντιν Γαῖαν· ἐκ δὲ τῆς Θέμιν,  
ἣ δὴ τὸ μητρὸς δευτέρα τόδ' ἔξετο  
μαντεῖον, ὥς λόγος τις· (Aesch. *Eum.* 1-4 [Weir Smyth])

Here, the Delphic oracle's antiquity, and hence authority, is traced back in time to Gaea (Earth), one of the first gods thought to have existed in the Greek theogony. Among the Zulu, a diviner's praise poem serves a similar function, but establishes the authority of the diviner by another means. Instead of the praise poem cataloging the diviner's prophetic ancestors, the poem lists 'their public achievements, their professional successes... As the praise poems of famous warriors list their victims, so do the praise poems of diviners enumerate theirs: the people whom they have brought to justice' (Gunner 1979: 260). Today the diviner is used more to recover stolen or lost items of importance, and not to 'smell out' witches, sorcerers and foul magic.

I have chosen to use the comparative method in order to construct my investigation of Greek and Zulu divination. The comparative method can be viewed as a narrower and more detailed version of the standard statistical method whereby a mass of information might be gathered from a large number of sources. It is only the number of cases studied and the time spent getting to know each of these cases that differentiates these two approaches (Lijphart 1971:684). As is the case with my study of divination, the comparative method typically employs a minimum of two cases for purposes of comparison. The fewer cases involved, the more time the investigator may spend in understanding the groups involved as well as the similarities and differences that are made apparent. However, it tends to be the differences between groups that are more interesting and edifying than any similarities. Ragin (1994: 105) calls this investigating 'diversity', where a researcher seeks 'to explain the diversity within a particular set of cases.' It is after all the differences that make the practices of any one group 'special' and worthy of investigation. For example, all societies may exhibit some sort of magical practices in their lives—from a belief in Lady Luck or Fate, to full magical rituals—but they will not all practice those rituals in a similar way. There is however a continued debate among scholars and philosophers over whether comparison of any kind is valid. This is where ideas like commensurability—whether societies are comparable—come into play. Stanley Tambiah (1990: 3) asks the question: 'How do we understand and represent the modes of thought and action of other societies, other cultures? Since we have to undertake this task from a western baseline so to say, how are we to achieve 'the translation of cultures', i.e. understand other cultures as far as possible in their own terms but in our language...' Tambiah (1990:127) answers this question by stating, as I did, that it is what makes each culture different, their 'center of gravity' as he puts it, that must be emphasized to establish the comparisons and the



common ground necessary to make them in the first place. This is why, rather than attempt a comparison of Greek society with modern South Africa or America, I have chosen to investigate its practices alongside the Zulu instead. Their beliefs (the Zulu and the Greeks) share more in common than with our modern and largely western, empirical notions, making the act of comparison possible.

As Morpheus explains to Neo, *time* obviously plays an important role in the art of divination. What I mean is that how one conceives of time, how one understands its ebb and flow, must of necessity impact upon whether something like divination can be believed to exist at all. After all, it is only with the work of men like Albert Einstein that time comes to be thought of as anything but absolute. Aristotle has this to say of the flow of time:

‘And because movement is a constant, time is similarly so. But everywhere time is the same, for the ‘now is the same in essence, as it is the same in every other; and the ‘now’ thus measures out time, the past and the future.’

καὶ ὥσπερ ἡ κίνησις αἰεὶ ἄλλη καὶ ἄλλη, καὶ ὁ χρόνος (ὁ δ' ἅμα πᾶς χρόνος ὁ αὐτός· τὸ γὰρ νῦν τὸ αὐτὸ ὃ ποτ' ἦν—τὸ δὲ εἶναι αὐτῷ ἕτερον—τὸ δὲ νῦν τὸν χρόνον ὀρίζει, ἢ πρότερον καὶ ὕστερον). (Arist. *Ph.* 219 b 10-14 [Ross])

Thus it would seem that the future (at least according to Aristotle) is always in motion! How is one then able to make predictions about something that is constantly altering its course? It seems a little like forecasting the weather, and yet we continue to do that today. Is divining any different? For St. Augustine, this point was vital. He commented that ‘without change, there is no temporal reality’ (*Civ. Dei* 11. 6) meaning that this element of uncertainty, for want of a better word, appears to be the driving force behind time itself—unless we end up with an eternal ‘now’ (Schopenhauer 1976: 229). It is this

sort of situation that makes the idea of time an extremely contentious one when discussing something like divination that requires a concrete notion of what is past, present and still to come, so that predictions can be made. Certainty is what is necessary.

One point worth emphasizing is the origin of this current of philosophical thinking. It had its beginnings at the upper end of the Greek social spectrum, with wealthy gentlemen of leisure or anyone who had a good deal of time on their hands, in which such a convoluted discourse could be entered into. The average Greek would probably not have known much about these ideas, and would have thus relied on the received knowledge of their ancestors, who had passed down divination as a viable and trustworthy source of information. What greater authority would the common folk have needed than Homer, who makes use of prophetic dreams, visions and diviners several times in his epics? Indeed for a long time before these statements of philosophical belief were ever made, divination in its many forms was entrenched throughout the Greek world as part of a complete belief system, which included vengeful and often interfering gods and goddesses, mighty heroes and magic. Perhaps the most famous example of the success of divining and prophecy is the story of Croesus' testing of the various Greek oracles, as told by Herodotus in his *Histories* (1. 46-49). In this story, Croesus the king of the Lydians, grows concerned at the increasing power of the Persian king, Cyrus. He wishes to know what he should do, and decides to test the many Greek oracles so that he should know whose advice to trust. He sends men to Delphi, Abae, Dodona, Amphiaraus, Trophonius, Brachidae, and Ammon. Croesus instructed them as follows to count the number of days that they were away, and on the hundredth day they were to



go to their assigned oracle and ask it what Croesus was doing at that moment. The oracles' responses were to be written down and then returned to Croesus.<sup>7</sup>

Croesus had chosen to do something truly strange so that it could not be guessed at by any of the oracles—he cut up a tortoise and cooked it, along with some lamb, in a great bronze pot. Only the prophetess at Delphi was able to correctly predict this. Tales like this one, put forward by the apparently analytical mind of the great historian, would only have served to strengthen the faith of the people in the ability of diviners to predict the future.

Bettini (1991: 193) argues that time itself is not an entity that *exists* freely, but rather is something given life, form and meaning by *culture*. 'Time, in short, is an investment on the part of culture'—in this case, the Greek culture. This is seen in Greek myth, where Rhea the earth goddess, assists her son Zeus in destroying her husband Chronos (Κρόνος—later<sup>8</sup> equated with Χρόνος, time). In a sense Zeus comes to subsume time itself, repeating the earlier story of Gaea and Ouranos, by which Chronos came to the fore. The Romans possessed a similar belief in cycles, with what they referred to as a *saeculum*. A *saeculum* 'seems to have been a period stretching from any given moment to the death of the oldest person born at that moment' (*ibid*), which means that while the *saeculum* was quite specific in

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<sup>7</sup> ἀπ' ἧς ἂν ἡμέρης ὀρμηθέωσι ἐκ Σαρδίων, ἀπὸ ταύτης ἡμερολογέοντας τὸν λοιπὸν χρόνον ἑκατοστῇ ἡμέρῃ χρᾶσθαι τοῖσι χρηστηρίοις, ἐπειρωτῶντας ὃ τι ποιέων τυγχάνοι ὁ Λυδῶν βασιλεὺς Κροῖσος ὁ Ἀλυάττεω ἄσσα δ' ἂν ἕκαστα τῶν χρηστηρίων θεσπίσῃ, συγγραψαμένους ἀναφέρειν παρ' ἑαυτόν. [Hude]

<sup>8</sup> Graf (1993: 176-198) explains the notion of allegorising myths more fully. Apparently at around the fifth century B. C., the old understanding of myth as narrative became too ethically unacceptable for particularly the emergent philosophers of the time. 'Taken literally, myths often seemed less than rational, and yet one could not dismiss them, because they had the authority of the time-honoured poets' (Graf 1993: 194). Therefore, Greek philosophers created allegorical explanations of the events that occurred in myth and Homer went from a poet to a founder of philosophy.

its duration<sup>9</sup> one could be said to begin at any moment, as is seen in the beginning of the reign of Augustus. As was the case then, the initiation of a new *saeculum* was a time of renewal and forgiveness of old evils, a time of special religious significance. (Warde Fowler 1922: 440)<sup>10</sup> This idea of cycles in the passage of time is evident even in the meso-American Maya, with whom 'linear time is incorporated into an all-encompassing cyclical pattern' of 'thirteen twenty-year periods'. (Farriss 1995: 113, 110) Within the cycles, linear time also exists, for example, in the form of the family lineage. The Zulu mark time in a similar manner, with genealogies forming a linear time scale within the eternal life-death cycles of nature. The Maya in fact use their cyclical time scale to allow for divination, believing that what has come before will come to pass once again. This is however not necessarily true of linear time, making the task of the diviner more difficult.

Graf (1997: 197) listed five broad approaches for ancient divining. His study was of Greek magic, but his findings can be applied to Zulu beliefs as well. There were 'direct visions' in which the diviner was actually in contact with some god, without another entity intervening; there were rites that employed trance to make contact with a god, often using a young boy as medium; the rite of dream divination; divining through magical rites that used certain objects like a bowl of water in which visions were seen; and necromantic rites divining through the spirits of the dead. Zulu divinatory practices stem from their strong belief in the afterlife and the power of the ancestral spirits over the living. It is these spirits that are seen as allowing prophetic revelations, and not a

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<sup>9</sup> Zosimus (2. 6) wrote that a *saeculum* was one hundred and ten years, but according to Warde Fowler (1922: 440) a *saeculum* typically lasted about one hundred years.

<sup>10</sup> Zosimus (2.6) notes the words of the Sibyl of Cumae on the occasion. She details the special ritual that should be conducted both in thanksgiving and for the assurance of future prosperity. At a certain meadow on the Tiber River, sacrifices were to be made to the Moirae, the Ilithyiae, Earth, Zeus, Hera and Apollo, along with the singing of hymns and offerings from the first fruits. When the ceremony was complete, those in attendance were to partake of a great feast.

god of prophecy as is the case with the ancient Greeks. Additionally, the Zulu, like many other peoples the world over, see dreams as an important means of communication between this world and the next. Finally, several approaches to divining occur among the Zulu, including possession by an ancestor spirit, the use of special ritual objects (the divining bones) and prophetic dreaming.

Graf's rather esoteric categorisations require a little elaboration to make their content clearer. First of all, he only appears to deal with the forms of divination that, as he puts it, make 'contact with a divinity' (1997: 197). These are called direct attempts at divination, as they require some sort of immediate link to the power or spirit involved. These links are manifested in the form of prophetic dreams and visions. Simply, the dreams and visions that were received are explained as having been sent by the power that is involved—an ancestor or god to whom the suppliant prayed. In both cases, the articles mentioned by Graf (lamps, bowls of water) are termed foci—something upon which the person seeking the dream or vision may 'focus' his/her attention. (See Luck (1985: 3-131) for an expanded discussion of spells and related magical terminology.) A correlate of this is prophetic possession, whereby a power invests itself in a human vessel,<sup>11</sup> which in turn speaks for the possessing power, declaring its prophecies. The Pythian Prophetess at Delphi is an example of this, since she was believed to be possessed by Apollo when she mounted the tripod in the sanctuary, and therefore, actually spoke on behalf of Phoibos. Graf notes that his fifth category, necromantic rites to contact the dead, might be construed as a sort of 'direct vision'. I would concur with this suggestion since, when one takes into account the fact that in a religious structure like that of the Zulu, the dead (ancestral spirits) actually replace the pantheon of gods

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<sup>11</sup> Graf (*ibid*) suggests a young boy because of the implication that he is especially pure, having not matured yet sexually. This is a point of importance in most early cults.



and goddesses found in a belief system like that of the ancient Greeks, it becomes essentially the same concept.<sup>12</sup> Through their rites and religious practices, the Zulu ask for prophecies from the departed, whom they believe have great power over the living. These prophecies are given in the same way as the Greek, through visions, dreams and occasionally possession, except that they do not rely on a god to send them, but receive the prophecies from the departed in the same way that Odysseus received predictions from the long dead Teiresias. (A fuller discussion of the *Nekuia* scene in *Od.* 11 follows in Chapter 3.)

Before moving into the major part of my argument I wish to map out the course of this expedition into the territory of the diviner. I should first like to note that I will be constructing this study in terms of the different types of divining that were employed by the Greeks and the Zulu, and shall thus not attend to the chronology of it too seriously, preferring rather to address each particular form (e.g. necromancy) in turn. In my first chapter, entitled 'Belief', I wish to lay open the religious world-views of the Greeks and the Zulu. The aim of this is to provide a base upon which our knowledge of divination, in these two cultures, may be constructed. Next I shall ask the question, what exactly is a diviner? and also take a look at who some of the more well-known diviners were. I am also interested in the shaman's special role as a soul guide or psychopomp, and how this relates to Zulu and Greek beliefs in the afterlife and the functioning of their respective diviners. The remainder of this thesis shall be comprised of an analysis of the different kinds of divining that are typical of the Greek and Zulu cultures. I will begin this by discussing the most universal form of divination – the portentous dream.

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<sup>12</sup> It must be said that the Zulu do believe in a single 'over-power' as it were—*Unkhulunkhulu*—who was the first of everything, but remains fairly remote in the life of the ordinary human being.

As I have already stated, I shall investigate both the Zulu and Greek elements of this phenomenon concurrently and make conclusions at the end. I shall then cover the mode of divining that is often referred to as 'inspired', in its context specific to each of the two peoples concerned. This essentially means covering the diviner that communicates with the ancestral spirits in the Zulu context, while investigating the many Greek oracles like Delphi that once existed. This is because in most of those cases, the priest or priestess at the oracle is possessed by a spirit or god (often Apollo) and is therefore 'inspired' by the god's power. Certain 'lesser' modes of divination will then be addressed. This will include marking the behaviour of birds, the use of omens, and some strange cases of prophecy in which, for example, Greek legends tell of the severed heads of people offering predictions. I shall close by drawing all of this together in an attempt at discussing the relevance of the art of divination and these related beliefs for the modern world.

*Chapter II:*

*Belief: Of Gods, Ancestors and Magic*

Belief in some shape or form is the foundation of the life of any human being. Whether one believes in the empirically provable tenets of Western Science, or in Zeus the King of the Heavens, it is ultimately all still a *belief* in something (or nothing as the case may be). Nowhere is this truer than in the Greek and Zulu cultures. It is therefore vital that the Greek and Zulu belief systems be thoroughly investigated in order to provide the background for my discussion of divination in later chapters. This is of course because the belief structures of these two peoples are what any belief in magic, and more importantly in divination, are founded on. The concept of magic is a significant one within both of these religions. This is because divination is a magical process in which rituals, trances and the like are employed to evoke clairvoyant or prescient abilities. The fourth piece of this puzzle of divination works from behind the other three—Greek Religion, Zulu Religion, and Magic—and is Time itself. The concept of time, as well as how one measures and defines it, plays a role in any understanding of divination, since Time places the abilities of the diviner in a specific context of either ‘past’ or ‘present’ or ‘future’.

In this chapter, I intend to address the issue of belief. What I mean is that to begin with I shall juxtapose the religious structures of the early Greeks with those of the Zulu. The religious beliefs of these two peoples form the basis for any rationale concerning the effectiveness of divination. Therefore to study how it is that these peoples believed that they could predict future events and investigate that which is unknowable, one must have an understanding of the place of divination in the general religious worldview of



both the Greeks and Zulus. As Roney-Dougal (2002: 171) writes, 'we create our pantheons from our own subconscious fears, imagination, hopes and longings. Thus, divinities of any particular pantheon are a mirror of the peoples who created them'.

From its very beginnings in Χάος,<sup>1</sup> Greek religion was constantly evolving. Hesiod's great poetic work, the *Theogony*, provides a comprehensive history of this evolution by charting the births and family heritage of the various gods and goddesses. In his *Works and Days*, Hesiod provides a similar description of the development of human beings through what he sees as several 'ages'. The first to exist were the men of gold who lived at the time of the ancient gods, Rhea and Chronos, and are depicted as living 'like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief...' (Hes. *Op.* 112-3, tr. H. G. Evelyn-White). Then followed the so-called men of silver and bronze, the age of heroes, and finally the men of his current day or the race of iron, who 'never rest from labour and sorrow by day and from perishing by night' (Hes. *Op.* 176-8, tr. H. G. Evelyn-White).

Taking the place of the early two generations of gods<sup>2</sup> are the Olympians, so named because they were believed to live on the heights of Mount Olympus. As Powell (1998: 136) writes, anthropomorphism is a primary characteristic of ancient Greek religion. Homer is perhaps the best source for descriptions of the 'home life' of these all too human deities, descriptions that could be said to offer 'an image of Greek life in the preliterate ages' (Powell 1998: 136). These gods are shown as extremely powerful humans with the same passions and hates but with the essential difference separating

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<sup>1</sup> This word gave us the modern English 'Chaos', but at that time was a personification by Hesiod, representing empty and infinite space.

<sup>2</sup> The first generation was that of Χάος itself, and the second generation included Rhea and Chronos (See Chapter 4 of Powell (1998)).

them from humans being their lack of mortality. Burkert (1985: 183) offers this clarification on the status of Greek godhood:

‘They are far from purely spiritual. Vital elements of corporeality belong inalienably to their being, for in personality, after all, body and mind are inseparable. Their knowledge surpasses the human measure by far, and their plans are directed to distant ends and generally find fulfillment; but even Zeus seems not always omniscient. The gods can traverse vast distances, but they are not omnipotent; they will come to visit their temples, but are not confined within the cult image. The gods are not immediately visible; they show themselves at most to individuals, or else they assume now this, now that human form. Nevertheless, it is perfectly possible for a god to have a physical encounter with a man...’

Burkert (1985: 120) also noted that ‘The spiritual unity of the Greeks was founded and upheld by poetry.’ It was from this ancient poetry that the Greeks derived the powers and traits that Burkert describes in the above quotation. It seems that poetry, particularly the work of Homer and Hesiod, was able to create unity of belief in the midst of a truly Panhellenic ‘cult’. A cornerstone of this cult was the Greek *polis*.

Being a major organizing force in Greek society, the city-state dominated ancient Greek socio-economics, with prominent examples of the city-state pattern including Athens and Sparta. Naturally the city-state or *polis* was also an important factor in the development of the religious life of Greece. According to Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood (2000: 19) the *polis* in fact ‘anchored, legitimated, and mediated all religious activity’. To explain what this means, Sourvinou-Inwood (2000: 19) says that the *polis* functioned in much the same way as the church does in Christianity—as a source of divinely sanctioned authority in a religious context that lacked any scriptural or doctrinal cannon. Thus the *polis* structure, with each city standing as its own political entity in a single ‘world’ of Greeks, organized how the cults of the gods were to be followed as well. Since the archaic period and the work of Homer, the personalities and



portfolios of the twelve Olympians and various lesser deities had been set, but the rites and prayers and rituals employed in their worship would naturally differ from city to city, and probably depend on the emphasis placed upon each god in that area. For example, the patron god or goddess who might have been believed to have founded the town would perhaps gain greater recognition, or Demeter, goddess of grain and agriculture, might be perceived as being more important in a farming district. Local heroes and honoured dead would also play a part in certain specific cults.

There are two additional components of Greek religion that need to be highlighted before concluding this portion of the discussion—the cult of the dead and the hero cult—but first I must briefly describe the Greek idea of a soul. The concept of the soul as *ψυχή* (*psyche*) is first set down in Homeric poetry. According to Burkert (1985: 195) the word also indicates the breath, but is not ‘the soul as bearer of sensations and thoughts, it is not the person, nor is it a kind of Doppelgänger. Yet from the moment it leaves the man it is also termed an εἶδωλον, a phantom image’.<sup>3</sup> The advent of this new sort of soul, with earlier beliefs holding that the dead could be malevolent entities, changed forever the motivations for the cult of the dead. Now the dead had no power but simply departed from the realm of the living to enter a grey and pointless afterlife of nothing in Hades. Of all the dead, only the prophet Teiresias is allowed to retain his past memories and abilities (Morrison 1981: 90). The rest know nothing. Granted there were places prepared for the extremely good and virtuous (Elysium) and for the lowest of the low (Tartaros) but cases of this are few and far between.

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<sup>3</sup> Naturally, the ancient Greek terms for ghosts and souls intersect. Ogden (2001: 219) provides a survey of these forms: σκιά, a ‘shade’; ψυχή, ‘soul’; φάσμα, ‘manifestation’; εἶδωλον, an ‘image’; νεκρός or νέκυς meaning a ‘dead person’ (often a dead body itself); and the rare πέμφιξ which indicates a cloud.

Now what exactly was the cult of the dead? J. G. Frazer (1968: 24) explains that it is built upon

‘...the supposition that the human personality in some form, whether we call it a soul, a spirit, a ghost, or what not, can survive death and thereafter continue for a longer or shorter time to exercise great power for good or evil over the destinies of the living, who are therefore compelled to propitiate the shades of the dead out of a regard for their own safety and well-being.’

Until it was legislated against in the time of Solon, great excesses were committed in pursuance of ritual concerning the departed—namely the use of expensive burial goods and the massive destruction of other expensive offerings at funerals (Burkert 1985: 195). The propitiation of the spirits of the dead was the cornerstone of the cult where angered or neglected spirits were able to use their influence to bring evil upon their descendants. Rituals therefore came to surround the grave, site of the spirit’s power (Burkert 1985: 194), and the summoning of a spirit from beyond the grave also became possible. In the famous *Nekuia* scene, Odysseus descends into the Underworld to obtain advice from the legendary prophet Teiresias, and must utilize a strange ritual to accomplish this (Hom. *Od.* 11. 20-33). Aeschylus in his *Persae* (607-680) shows the Persian Queen Mother, Atossa, summoning the spirit of her husband Darius to ask his advice using similar necromantic methods. Eventually, the hero cult could be said to replace the cult of the dead, whereby a famous ancestor would be given honour and sacrifice, rather than all of the departed spirits.

The final point requiring investigation is the place of the hero cult in Greek religion. Burkert (1985: 204) notes that it too arose under the influence of the ancient poets and seems to have been designed to counteract the importance of the cult of the dead. Furthermore, although a particular ancestor might receive heroic honours, it was not an

ancestor cult, but an 'expression of group solidarity' (Burkert 1985: 204). I must disagree with this assertion, for although the Greek hero cult might not have been an ancestor cult in its purest form, most people claimed descent from a mythic or Homeric hero or even a god, essentially making ancestors out of them for themselves. Elements from the earlier cult of the dead are subsumed by the new hero cult. The hero was now able to reach out to the living from the other side, and use his power for good or ill, depending on whether his honour had been satisfied by mortals (Burkert 1985: 205-7). Yet heroes were once mortals and therefore, except in the case of Herakles, could never be gods. They were however from a much greater time, namely the age of myth, and so assumed a status as demi-powers (*ibid*).

The tenets of Zulu religion are based upon two overarching features, a great supreme deity, and a so-called cult of ancestral spirits. Both segments of their belief structure are accompanied by an explanatory mythology concerning their origins and importance in contemporary Zulu life. Henry Callaway (1870: 1), one of the first scholars of Zulu culture, begins his classic work, *The Religious System of the Amazulu*, by saying that 'Unkulunkulu is no longer known. It is he who was the first man...' According to Zulu tradition, *Unkulunkulu* was the progenitor of all people. His name essentially means 'the Old One' (Callaway 1870: 7 n.16) and he is said to have originated from a bed of reeds (Callaway 1870: 41). Some believe that this first man is the same being as the one called *Umvelinqangi*, but others conceptualize *Unkulunkulu* more as the archetypal 'Adam', of Judaeo-Christian traditions. Conversely it is also believed that *Umvelinqangi* was the first of everything and therefore the one who created everything, including *Unkulunkulu*.<sup>4</sup> According to Callaway (1870: 7 n.16) this explanation is

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<sup>4</sup> *Umvelinqangi* as the word suggests was the 'first cause' (Callaway 1870: 7 n. 16) similar to the notion that Plato (*Tim.* 27-29) suggested.



further complicated by another 'source of being', namely the reed itself (*Uthlanga*) which in the Zulu philosophy needs to be included along with *Unkulunkulu* and *Umvelinqangi*. This is because *Unkulunkulu* was born of a bed of the reeds and all people were sprung from the reed as well.

A possible reason for the confusing of *Unkulunkulu* and *Umvelinqangi* could be that they both attempt to designate a first—*Unkulukulu* the first man and *Umvelinqangi* the first of all things. Therefore on occasion, the first man is thought of as being the Creator. Something that is important in looking at these beliefs is that because *Unkulunkulu* is believed to no longer play an obviously active role in the affairs of men and the universe at large, no person directs any prayers or sacrifices to him, but instead 'they pray to the *Amatongo*' (Callaway 1870: 8) who still have an impact upon the circumstances of daily life.

It is now a good time to properly introduce the Zulu concept of the ancestral spirits or *Amatongo*. Willoughby (1928: 10) offers several words for a 'spirit' among the Bantu-speaking peoples. These include *umoya*, (a wind, and not unlike the Greek term *pneuma*) *idhlozi*, *itongo* (plural *Amatongo*), and *isitutu*, all of which he believes designate a soul once it leaves the body. Callaway (1870: 10 n.24) contradicts Willoughby in this regard, saying that only a Zulu familiar with Christian tradition would use *umoya* to mean anything other than the air. This must have something to do with the Holy Spirit of Christian theology. Callaway's opinion of the use of the remaining three terms is however congruent with that of Willoughby in that they represent the spirit when it no longer inhabits the body. Furthermore, the *Amatongo* are sometimes referred to as *Umhlala*—'the earth', or the *Abapansi*, the 'Subterraneans'

(Callaway 1870: 144, n14). This latter label is because of the many Zulu myths surrounding the land of the dead. Like many ancient religions, the Greek included, the Zulu believe that the souls of the dead eventually descend into the underworld, a place deep in the earth, essentially similar to the Hades of Greco-Roman understanding. Willoughby (1928: 88) indicates that there is a distinct difference between the Zulu underworld and the manner in which the ancients conceived of it. The Zulu believed the underworld was exactly the same as life on earth, where they could hunt and still enjoy the company of friends. This is of course quite a stark contrast to the mindless existence in the afterlife that the Greeks believed in! There is no special place of punishment or reward envisioned—a Heaven or a Hell, Elysium or Tartaros. Life seems to go on like normal, just somewhere else!

Brian du Toit's (1959: 76) research catalogues a few interesting insights concerning the idea of a soul as held in traditional Zulu belief:

'Gedurende sy lewe bestaan elke mens egter uit twee dele: 'n siel (wat die liggaam tydens slaap verlaat) en wat van die skaduwee verskil. By die dood is daar ook 'n siel wat die liggaam verlaat en wat die voorvadergees word.'

During his life every person is comprised of two parts: a soul (that leaves the body during sleep) and that is different from a shadow. At death there is also a soul that leaves the body and that becomes an ancestor spirit. (My translation)

To my mind this is a tripartite division of the spirit of mortal men and women. There is on one hand, the light and the dark, the anima/animus and shadow self, to express it in more Jungian terminology.<sup>5</sup> The third element in my understanding of the Zulu soul concept is the departing soul itself. This soul as Du Toit writes, joins with the ancestors

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Jung had a certain fascination with non-western cultures. See "Archaic Man" (50-73), "The Dreamlike World of India" (515-524), and "What India can Teach Us" (525-530) in Jung. (1970, tr. R. F. C. Hull).

in death, and is reminiscent of the ancient Greek notion of the *eidolon* (image) as a spirit having left the body. It almost seems as though for a Zulu, man is made up of both good and evil, which are left behind as one moves on into the next world. However, Du Toit (1959: 106) seems to confuse the issue by later writing:

'Die Zoeloes glo dat 'n lyk net 'n kort skaduwee het wat saam met die lyk begrawe word, terwyl die regte skaduwee of lang skaduwee die liggaam verlaat en 'n *iDlozi* word.'

The Zulu believe that the body only has a small shadow that is buried with the body, while the real shadow or long shadow leaves the body and becomes an *iDlozi*. [Ancestor spirit] (My translation.)

Since the Zulu word *isiThunzi* can represent both the shadow and the personality in general (Du Toit 1959: 105), perhaps the reference to the shadow self in the earlier quotation is a metaphorical explanation of the soul's departure from the deceased. Finally, the shape that this spectre is said to assume upon leaving the body is a human one, as it was in life, with all of its likes and preferences (Du Toit 1959: 106). An interesting point of congruity exists in this regard between the Zulu and the Greeks. Indeed both societies believe that it is possible for the spirit of a dead person to assume the form of a snake. Burkert (1985: 195) claims that some scientific debate over this notion led the ancient Greeks to put forward the hypothesis that the snake was the spine of the dead person, metamorphosed at death. The Zulu go so far as to name the specific snakes which dead men may become: Chiefs may transform into black or green mambas, chieftainesses may become a snake called *Umtlhwazi*, commoners may sometimes become this type of snake, as well as transforming into the *Umzingandhlu* snake or the *Ubulube* snake, which is also called *Inkwakwa* (Callaway 1870: 196).



The Zulu ancestor cult is not something sinister in which the average person is forced into the worship of the dead. Worship is also perhaps the wrong word to describe its practices, and Berglund (1976: 28) chooses to refer to the association of ancestor and descendants as a 'communion', rather than in a hierarchical worshipper/object of worship format.<sup>6</sup> Callaway (1870: 144) writes that 'the head of each household [its progenitor] is worshipped by the children of that house... These men are the familial spirits to whom most honour is given and this occurs especially at times like a new birth in the family or at initiations (Du Toit 1959: 139-67). To my mind this seems identical to the Greek hero cult since the 'first man' of the clan is a sort of mythical figure in the distant past and is thus a hero type for the average person. Granted the Zulu do propitiate other 'lesser' ancestor spirits as well, but this is usually due to very special circumstances, typically at a recently departed soul's induction into the *amatongo*, or if a diviner indicates that a problem is due to a particular spirit's wrath. There are also tribal spirits that are venerated by the tribe as a whole, usually at a time of great significance like the death of the king or a drought in the land (Du Toit 1959: 168-85).

Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa (1996: 18), a modern day *isangoma*, writes, 'We [the Zulu] believe that the soul is in fact an integral part of God and that our souls came into being when God created Himself. We exist because God exists, and our souls are fragments of this Universal Self.' Although this explanation appears to have been written using more Christian terminology, it provides a good picture of the 'oneness' that is inherent in the Zulu religious system. For them it seems that all is connected in some or other form. This along with the power of the deceased ancestor is how the Zulu are able to divine the unseen and unknown.

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<sup>6</sup> In its simplest form, the Zulu ancestor cult can be characterised primarily by the notion of respect for one's elders (Berglund 1976: 28).

To study both the culture of the ancient Greeks and that of the Zulu implies not only a belief in the idea of magic but the existence of the phenomenon itself, so pervasive it was in both societies. However, the existence of similar categories like magic and religion, does not equate to similar understandings of the concepts involved, especially where complex social constructs are concerned. Parker (2001) shows this particularly well in his discussion of the misconceptions surrounding the modern understanding of ancient sexuality. He (Parker 2001: 317) makes two important points using a linguistic approach in this regard—‘first, the words and categories of one language and culture may not translate directly into another’, and second, ‘even within a language, some terms and categories are more fundamental than others.’ From this rationale, etic and emic categories are derived. The emic category is the most important for the purposes of my discussion, since it is an intra-cultural construct. It is after all the manner in which the Greeks and the Zulu perceived magic and religion that is really interesting, and not so much the technicalities of their practices or the overarching concepts that may be applied to them. However, Versnel (1991: 185) believes that this sort of cultural comparison must take place on an etic, and not on an emic level, meaning that the investigation should function along more generalised lines. As he writes (1991: 185), “It might be more rewarding to inquire whether non-Western cultures do or do not recognize a distinction between categories *we* introduce...” This is the best explanation for employing two “non-Western” societies as the subjects of my research, since they would be somewhat closer to each other in their understanding of the mystical than they could ever be to a “modern-Western, rationalistic and biased” (Versnel 1991: 180) notion of magic. The inner workings of magic have been subjected to rigorous discussion for many years—works stretching as far back as the first philosophical writings bear testament to this fact. Of late, this interest has begun once again to churn



out a steady flow of books and articles concerning the subject.<sup>7</sup> Why then can one trace a more or less sustained interest in a phenomenon as esoteric as magic from almost the dawn of the age of humanity? Is it perhaps because, as Serena Roney-Dougal (2002: 6) notes, 'recent surveys reveal that over 50 per cent of the population have experienced what seem to be a psychic, or at least unexplained, event at least once in their life...' Why then, particularly with the advent of rationalist empiricism in the recent past, has a level of skepticism developed that 'is a curious anomaly in the history of humanity' (Roney-Dougal 2002: 7)? There was of course skepticism and even outright ridicule of some magicians in both the Zulu and Greek societies but this is more an exception than a rule.<sup>8</sup> To reinforce this notion I draw upon the classic anthropological study by Evans-Pritchard (1950). He wrote that in Azande society, like that of the Zulu and the Greeks, it was generally believed that a good many diviners were little more than cheats who, possessing no real mantic abilities, simply told their clients exactly what they wanted to hear so that they could make an easy profit (Evans-Pritchard 1950: 183).

To both Greek and Zulu, belief in powers that were beyond their comprehension was a cornerstone of their existence: it made the loss of a loved one easier, explained the failure of a crop, and added unity and cohesion to the society as a whole. Magic, and the so-called psychic, or what is today referred to as the realm of psi (named for the first letter of the Greek word for soul according to Roney-Dougal 2002: 6), went through many changes over the course of its long evolution, none more striking than the incursion of Christianity upon the practice of the mystical arts. In Greek society, magic was an integral part of everyday life. A man would not only pray for the success of his

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<sup>7</sup> See for example the recent collection of papers in Jordan, Montgomery, & Thomassen. (eds.) (1999).

<sup>8</sup> Although second century, the ridicule of a mage is clearly evident in Lucian's *Alexander the False Prophet*. See also the work of Henry Callaway for the constant reiteration of the fact that the majority of Zulu people viewed many a diviner as a con and extortionist.

business venture, but might also cast a binding spell to prevent the success of a competitor. Everyone used magic, whether it was in the form of a simple utterance to ward off evil or a complex ritual for gaining divine knowledge.

Fritz Graf (2002: 94) states, 'What constitutes a magician, again, is his unusual closeness to the divine sphere.' Particularly because divination is primarily a magical operation, this notion can of course be applied to characterizing the diviner with the same nearness to the 'other world', or the realm of the spirits, gods and ancestors, the origin of magic. It is because of this similarity and shared foundation in magic that a brief survey of the subject is necessary prior to any further investigation of divination proper.

There are several terms in Greek that describe the mage or wizard, with the most obvious being the ultimate derivation of the word 'magic' itself—μαγεία. The word μαγεία stems from the name of a group of Zoroastrian priests (Graf 2002: 93) in ancient Persia, called the μάγοι, who were supposed to possess magical abilities. The μάγος (singular form) was thus the sorcerer of the ancient world. Interestingly enough, there is a related term, μαγγανεύω, that has to do with bewitching or placing a charm upon someone, but which simultaneously bears the connotation of cheating or duping someone. (LSJ s.v. 'μαγγανεύω') The word μάγος also came to acquire this negative connotation, meaning that to call someone a mage in the ancient world could well have been a double-edged comment. In later Roman times, to accuse someone of wizardry left them having to prove that any powers (e.g. prophecy) they possessed were from a righteous and legitimate source (Cotter 1999: 176). As Fritz Graf (1997: 61) notes, 'It is... public opinion that creates the magician [or diviner] and the influences he has.'

This is because they are *outsiders*, people who live or behave in a manner that is beyond the bounds of acceptability for the norms of a particular group. It is therefore strange that in a culture where magic, divine interference and divination were all commonplace beliefs, that magicians should be both reviled and revered. After all, one cannot simply dismiss the Greeks or the Zulu as simple because of their belief in magic, for although they held sorcery to be real, they were selective in their choice of what was true, as the skepticism of various texts of the time indicates.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Pliny (*H.N.* 30.1) does call magic ‘the most fraudulent of arts’. With the aid of Parker (2000) we see that this kind of skepticism is also common when dealing with diviners. He also points out that the clients of diviners are regular and intelligent people, who often believe, as Evans-Pritchard (1950: 183) noted, that many diviners are frauds. However, ‘such skepticism supports rather than subverts belief in the possibility of divination, since failures can be explained through the incompetence or fraud of particular diviners’ (Parker 2000: 80).

A γόνης is also a type of wizard, or more specifically as Liddell and Scott (LSJ s.v. γόνης) note, ‘one who howls out enchantments.’ The word appears to have its derivation in γοῶ, the Greek term for wailing or weeping.

A final term worth discussing is θεουργία, theurgy or if one separates the word into its component parts, ‘god-working’—having influence over the divine sphere through special magical means. This was an attempt by more pious wizards, who wished to place their profession in a better light with the general public, at separating theurgic

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<sup>9</sup> Pliny’s comments in the *Natural History* (28-31) are an excellent example.



rites from those of μαγεία and γοητεία,<sup>10</sup> defining it instead in a more priestly manner as obtaining magical powers by working through the gods rather than trying to bend them to your will. In this context the ancient writer Plotinus put forward the concept of sympathetic magic or συμπάθεια, wherein he conceived of the universe 'as a huge living being', explaining this idea saying:

‘One part [of the universe] is in sympathetic connection with another, just as in one tense string; for if the string is plucked at the lower end, it has a vibration at the upper...’ (Graf 2002: 100)

As he wrote it, and as many modern spiritualist movements understand it, everything is connected to everything else, a notion that also resonates strongly within Zulu beliefs. Thus in this case the wizard is a person familiar with this concept of συμπάθεια, and who knows how to use this sympathy to his or her advantage (Graf 2002: 101).

As I noted in my introduction, divination, particularly the forms of divining that I am emphasizing here, are all bound up within the Greek and the Zulu conceptions of the phenomenon of magic. Therefore, a knowledge of some of the basics of magic sets the scene with regards to understanding how divination functions. In the Zulu system of understanding magic, as is the case in Greek belief, it is the person casting the spell and not the spell itself that is good or evil. Ngubane (1977: 30) puts it simply—‘The intention is the crucial point that labels an act as one of sorcery’ or *ukuthakathi*, an act that is quintessentially evil (Ngubane 1977: 31, n. 2). The *isangoma* and *inyanga* practice magic for nobler ends, one using the mystical arts, through the intervention of the ancestral spirits, to divine, and the other using the magic inherent in special roots and herbs in the creation of potions and the like. While the majority of diviners practice

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<sup>10</sup> γοητεία is the various magical practices of the γόης.



their art with the well-being of their communities in mind, some choose to practice magic for evil ends. In her chapter concerning the subject, Ngubane (1977: 30-46) calls attention to three specific forms of evil magic use. The first is the so-called Night Sorcerer, perhaps the closest concept that the Zulu have to the medieval European idea of a witch. 'Zulu believe that such a sorcerer was "created and moulded with an evil heart"' (Ngubane 1977: 31). Always male, the Night Sorcerer, as the name suggests, enacts his magic under cover of darkness, attempting to harm anyone without a particular reason. As is the case with Greek magic, this sorcerer is typically an outsider, someone who does not belong to the homestead.

By contrast, the Day Sorcerer employs the magical arts primarily because of 'personal animosity' (Ngubane 1977: 35). By far women are the most prevalent Day Sorcerers, although there are some male practitioners. This discrepancy emerges because of two mitigating factors. The first and most important is anthropological and concerns the polygamous nature of Zulu society. The second factor is simply that women are not able to practice Night or Lineage Sorcery (the third type of evil magic use) and so must use the methods of Day Sorcery in order to get what they want. Therefore only the first factor requires any explanation. Simply put, wives vie for the attentions of their husband and the honours paid to a wife of a higher station in the household. Sometimes in order to gain the upper hand a wife may employ magical charms against her opposition (the other wives) or even upon her husband (Ngubane 1977: 31-34). Thus we see that even in the context of evil magic, there is, as in divination, no concern for the sex of the practitioner. Whether one is male or female only provides a slightly different way of going about things.

Lastly, the notion of lineage sorcery is embedded deeply in the Zulu understanding of the relationship between the living and the ancestor shades. In lineage sorcery, the male head of a household will exhort the shades to refrain from assisting a certain relative (Ngubane 1977: 36). Ntshangase (2000: 9) writes that the psychological effect of this is staggering, since 'African people believe that if the ancestors have turned their backs on them, nothing on God's earth can turn on their favour.'

In conclusion, it is quite interesting to find that in a very similar manner, the philosopher Plato, in his *Laws*, believes magic to be a form of 'psychological poisoning' (Graf 2002: 97) since to his mind, it is like a man using a natural poison upon an enemy, with the difference being that magic or the threat of the use of magic, forms a paranoia in a man's mind, effectively poisoning it through superstition. For Plato 'magic... exists and seems to have power over the minds of its victims, but magic does so not because its practitioners are able to manipulate divine powers to their evil ends but because they manipulate human minds by their deceptive rituals and spells' (Graf 2002: 99). Yet, as I will show, Plato conceived of divination and prophecy as real, despite many of the forms of prophecy that were used in his time being magical operations.

Chapter III:Who Were The Diviners?

After having set down both the beliefs of the Greeks and the Zulu concerning magic and the human soul, I can now begin work on the true subject of my inquiry—divination and prophecy. I intend carrying out this task by structuring it around a number of simple questions relating to divination. I have headed the first part with the question, “Who were the diviners?” and shall therefore be discussing what it was that made or designated someone a diviner among the ancient Greeks and the Zulu. This will include ideas like ‘the call’ of a diviner, certain abilities that made the person seem ‘special’ or ‘different’, and of course, the gender dynamic, or more simply why is it that some diviners were male and others female. Finally, I shall also cite some examples of diviners from the literature as illustrative of the points covered. I have decided to present this comparison in a structured manner by first presenting the Greek point of view and then the Zulu. I will close by evaluating some of the similarities and differences.

I begin with the diviners whose activities and *successful* prophecies<sup>1</sup> cannot be completely explained by scientific or logical argument. For the purposes of this discussion, I shall refer to these diviners, whose ‘powers’ cannot be easily explained, as ‘true’ diviners. Dodds (1973: 160) says that there has always been a distinction between ‘technical’ and ‘natural’ divining—divining with the power of a god or spirit and divining using a manmade technique like palmistry. Plato (*Phaed.* 244 a-c) put forward this idea in ancient Greece, suggesting that inspired divination had always been

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am not referring to people like Michel de Nostradame, whose quatrains can be interpreted to suit almost any situation, but to diviners who make prophecies that are more obvious in their intent.



respected historically, but in their more rational age, it was seen as being less important next to more rational techniques that did not require the diviner to lose all sense of reason. Thus there came to be a distinction between what could be construed as sensible (using a technique) and senseless (requiring inspiration from a god) divination.

This distinction between diviners who make use of some sort of technique like observing the flight and behaviour of birds or throwing the bones, and what is called 'inspired' divination, is a very old one and was held by both the ancient Greeks and the Zulu. In what is called 'inspired' divination, one of two things may occur. Either the priest or *isangoma* receives visions or information of some sort from an entity not of this reality, or a spirit or god actually possesses the person, taking them over as it were, for a short time. The Greeks often referred to this type of mediumistic state as ἐνθουσιασμός or a state of the god (θεός) being within (ἐν) a person. The best example of this state is to be found with the Pythian priestess of Delphi, where Apollo, the god of prophecy, was thought to speak through the priestess. Parke (1988: 9) tells us 'it was ordinarily supposed that when the Pythia prophesied, she was in an ecstasy in which her own personality was completely submerged in that of Apollo. When she spoke in the first person, it was the god himself who spoke.' Conversely, the Sibylline prophetess, who also obtained her mantic powers from Apollo, was not possessed by the god—only inspired by him (Parke 1988: 9). Yet when Plato (*Phaed.* 244b) cites three instances of inspired prophecy (μαντικῇ ἐνθέῳ) the priestesses of Delphi and Dodona, and Sibylline prophetess are listed, who with their madness (μανία) are able to foretell the future of all Greece. Plutarch (*De Pyth. Or.* 397c [Babbitt]) however, describes the events at the Delphi slightly differently:

‘...for it is not the speech of the god [Apollo], nor his voice, nor his manner of speaking, nor his metre, but it is the woman’s [the Pythia]; and there he only places the fantasies and forms a light in her soul for what is to come; for that is ‘inspiration’ ...’

οὐ γὰρ ἔστι θεοῦ ἡ γῆρυς οὐδ’ ὁ φθόγγος οὐδ’ ἡ λέξις οὐδὲ τὸ μέτρον  
ἀλλὰ τῆς γυναικός· ἐκεῖνος δὲ μόνος τὰς φαντασίας παρίστησι καὶ φῶς  
ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ποιεῖ πρὸς τὸ μέλλον· ὁ γὰρ ἐνθουσιασμός τοιοῦτόν ἐστι.

It seems that the question of whether or not the Pythian prophetess was actually the one to make the prophecies or whether it was Apollo speaking for her, was a point of debate even in the ancient world. One thing is certain, namely that the ancients had an extremely high regard for the inspired prophet (whether she spoke under the influence of the god or whether he simply used her to speak himself). Electra, a woman in the Euripidean play of the same name, illustrates this fact. She knows of a prophecy made by the Pythia at Delphi concerning the return of her brother, Orestes, and says that she trusts in divination that is inspired by Apollo, but refuses to accept anything that comes from manmade techniques of prophecy (Eur. *El.* 399f [Parmentier & Gregoire])<sup>2</sup> because they are inferior to those who prophesy through the power of a divinity.

Returning to the Delphic oracle, we should note that the Pythian prophetess was the only female in a position of authority at the sanctuary. When she was possessed and delivered her divine revelations, they were first received by a group of male priests, whose task it was to translate the divine ramblings into the more refined and intelligible hexameters, which we have as the record today. Furthermore the Pythia, although she was in earliest times a young maiden, came to be chosen from the ranks of mature and married women. When a woman was selected for the role she had to leave her family

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<sup>2</sup> Λοξίου γὰρ ἔμπεδοι  
χρησμοί, βροτῶν δὲ μαντικὴν χαίρειν ἐῷ.

for reasons of ritual purity, and from then on symbolically wore the clothes of a young maid, harkening back to the prophetess of earlier days (Parke & Wormell 1956: 35). Myers (1880: 475) in an essay on Greek oracles does note that ‘no complication shall be introduced into the process of oracular inquiry by her [the Pythia’s] youth or good looks’ and that no preference was given in selection of the prophetess to women who had previously displayed any precognitive abilities or symptoms of the ‘sacred disease’—epilepsy.

The Delphic oracle is far more ancient than even the god of prophecy, Apollo. As Dempsey (1918: 1) so poetically says, there were several ‘darker cults’ to exist there before him. Initially the sanctuary, at a place called Pytho, was used by the goddess Gaia or Ge, the earth goddess. This of course was far back in Greek prehistory, but was evidenced by the twin taboos that were observed by visitors to the sanctuary—‘unwashed feet and sleeping on the ground’—which seem to indicate, as Morrison (1981: 96) wrote, a ‘closeness to earth, which is always regarded as a source of prophecy.’ Next to take over the use of the sanctuary were Themis, and then Phoebe. It was only then that Apollo took the place over by slaying its guardian, the legendary snake Python. This part of the tale forms the Pythian element to the Homeric Hymn to Apollo. Aeschylus (*Eum.* 1-8 [Weir Smyth]) provides this list of previous owners in poetic fashion:

‘Firstly, in my prayer I honour Gaia, first prophet  
of all the gods; and Themis  
second to hold this place of prophecy  
after her mother, so the story goes; and thirdly  
as assigned by fate, not by some force,  
another titan, a child of the earth, took her place,  
Phoibe; and she gave the place as a birthday present to  
Phoebus; Phoebus, a name being formed from only a small change to the word.’



Πρῶτον μὲν εὐχῇ τῇδε πρεσβεύω θεῶν  
 τὴν πρωτόμαντιν Γαίαν· ἐκ δὲ τῆς Θέμιν,  
 ἥ δὴ τὸ μητρὸς δευτέρα τόδ' ἔζετο  
 μαντεῖον, ὥς λόγος τις· ἐν δὲ τῷ τρίτῳ  
 λάχει, θελούσης, οὐδὲ πρὸς βίαν τινός,  
 Τιτανὶς ἄλλη παῖς Χθονὸς καθέζετο,  
 Φοῖβη· δίδωσι δ' ἥ γενέθλιον δόσιν  
 Φοῖβω· τὸ Φοίβης δ' ὄνομ' ἔχει παρώνυμον.

Euripides (*Iph. Taur.* 1234-1283) told another story of the origins of Delphi that is slightly different. He wrote that Apollo came to Mount Parnassus while still a babe in arms, and it was then that he slew the dragon, Python. Gaia was angered at his presumption at she chose to send prophetic dreams to humans as retribution for Apollo taking over her sanctuary. But Apollo appealed to his father, Zeus, and he reformed all of the prophetic dreams so that not all of them would come true.

In the long history of prophecy in the area, the person who prophesies at Delphi has always been a woman. Dempsey (1918: 55) explains using the following generalization: 'It has been observed at all times and in all countries that women are especially prone to orgiastic religious seizure, and with such moods prophecy and magic have been associated.' His comment appears to have been less indicative of any scientific fact and more indicative of attitudes towards women at the turn of the century. However, his comment does bear some relevance to the two cultures being studied here. This is explained by Walker's (1972: 68) investigation of spirit possession in Africa in which she puts forward the notion that a type of 'suggestion' could be employed upon the members of a community (women in this case) who have a less defined notion of their own self-worth and are therefore more easily coerced into reaching an ecstatic state, thereby achieving notoriety through spiritual means. I would argue that an idea like this

almost certainly applies to the status of women in both the Zulu and Greek societies.<sup>3</sup> Therefore according to this logic, in these two cultures in which women were conditioned for a submissive and largely secondary role, they would necessarily have been more suggestible than men. Ngubane (1977: 93) writes, 'That a woman's place is submission while that of a man is dominance is demonstrated by the ceremonial wailing (*isililo*)... Weeping and wailing are associated with helplessness.' Burkert (1985: 192) notes that among the Greeks it was also the 'duty' of women to perform the funeral lament. This, when coupled with the assertion that 'ceremonial possession is a result of social pressure on the individual' (Walker 1972: 76), necessarily leads to the prevalence of women in roles as ecstatic diviners.

The writer Aelian in a late work called *On the Characteristics of Animals* (11.2) provides another example, relevant to the discussion, because it also concerns the god Apollo as well as a priestess. Apparently the people of Epirus held an annual festival in which a *virgin priestess* went into a sacred area that held several very important snakes, supposedly the offspring of the ancient serpent Python of Delphi. The priestess was to take and offer a particular food to the snakes who then 'prophesied' as to whether the year at hand would be a good one, depending on whether or not they took and ate the food that the priestess offered. Again a woman has the position of priest and again, she must maintain a ritual purity through sexual abstinence. This sort of taboo is a common one among ancient religious orders, as Kalweit (1987: 30) noted of the Yamana shaman of Tierra del Fuego, who when training are completely forbidden any contact with family or any sexual activity. 'The daily regimen fosters inwardness and contemplation.' Even among the Azande (Evans-Pritchard 1950: 286) having sex

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the place of women in Zulu society, see Krige (1936) and Hanretta (1997). There is an extensive bibliography for the role of women in ancient Greece. See Blundell (1995), Cantarella (1987), Massey (1988) and Pomeroy (1975).

disqualifies one from using their poison oracle for fear of ritual pollution rendering the oracle ineffective. I would suppose that this taboo on sexual relations is due to the notion that when one is satisfying or even thinking of the 'baser' desires, there can be little room for the influence of the divine.

Now a man whose mantic abilities were as famous as the Delphic oracle itself was Teiresias. Indeed his skills were of such repute that he was commemorated in many works of ancient literature and in no less than Homer's *Odyssey* (11. 20-33, 90-96, 138-149) in which Odysseus comes to one of the many portals of Hades to call forth the spirit of the long dead Teiresias so that he might divine a way home for Odysseus and his men. So favoured was Teiresias that he of all of the souls of the dead in Hades was the only one allowed to retain his mind in death (Morrison 1981: 90). But Teiresias was a normal human being to begin with, and as one of the more common tales informs us, he only received his powers of prophecy as a young man. As the poet Callimachus (*Hymn* 5. 100-102) tells it, there existed a prohibition on anyone gazing upon a god or goddess without his or her permission.<sup>4</sup> Apparently Teiresias came upon Athena when she was bathing one day at a fountain and was blinded for seeing her in it. Feeling sorry for the young man she decided to make him into a diviner that all people would remember<sup>5</sup> (Callim. *Hymn* 5. 121-122). Athena also gave him the staff of bay to guide his steps and by which his status as diviner was symbolised.

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<sup>4</sup> ὅς κε τιν' ἀθανάτων, ὅκα μὴ θεὸς αὐτὸς ἔλῃται,  
ἀθρήσῃ, μισθῶ τοῦτον ἰδεῖν μεγάλῳ. [Mair]

<sup>5</sup> μάντιν ἐπεὶ θησῶ νιν ἀοίδιμον ἔσσομένοισιν,  
ἦ μέγα τῶν ἄλλων δὴ τι περισσώτερον. [Mair]



An alternative telling of the Teiresias myth is related by Apollodorus (3. 6. 7). In this story, Teiresias sees two snakes having intercourse and strikes them. He is immediately transformed into a woman and spends about seven years like that before he is finally turned back. A third version begins with a heated argument between Zeus and his wife Hera over whether it is the man or the woman who experiences greater pleasure in sexual intercourse. Teiresias, because he has spent time as both a man and a woman, is called upon to adjudicate and decides that it is the woman. Angry at his decision, Hera blinds him, but Zeus compensates him with the gifts of prophecy and long life (Brisson 2002: 116-121). In both the tale involving Athena and the one involving Zeus and Hera, the gift of prophecy is given to Teiresias in recompense or in 'counterbalancing' (Brisson 2002: 122) the fact that something has blinded Teiresias physically—as though one cannot be considered a true diviner without first experiencing some suffering. Therefore, in the male/female dynamic of diviners, Teiresias has apparently experienced both sides!

In the Greek culture, neither masculinity nor femininity was a requirement for the office of diviner. Indeed, the sex of the diviner depended largely upon the whim of the god Apollo or upon the established mantic traditions of an area (e.g. there was only ever a female Pythia.) It seems that the Greeks believed the mantic gift was Apollo's to give to whomever he chose, that is until the later emergence of the god Dionysus, who took on the control of prophetic frenzy (literally madness) stemming from divine inspiration. A prime example of Apollo's whim lies in the dramatic tale of Cassandra, a Trojan princess taken as a prize by King Agamemnon, who led the Greek assault on the city of Troy. According to the myth, she once caught the eye of Apollo and he promised her the gift of prophecy for her love. Once Apollo had bestowed the gift upon her, she

rebuffed his attentions. Furious but unable to retract his boon, Apollo instead perverted Cassandra's gift so that nobody would ever believe her prophecies. Thereafter she predicted the fall of Troy but because of her curse none of the Trojans heeded her warning (Aes. Ag. 1199-1215). Euripides in fact has Cassandra make the following prophecy in his play:

'... I shall not sing of the axe,  
That is upon my neck and others',  
The slaying of the mother, the destruction of the kin of Atreus.  
But I will show this city [Troy] to be more fortunate  
Than the Achaeans...'

πέλεκυν οὐχ ὑμνήσομεν,  
ὃς ἐς τράχηλον τὸν ἐμὸν εἴσι χιτῶνων·  
μητροκτόνους τ' ἀγῶνας, οὓς οὐμοὶ γάμοι  
θήσουσιν, οἴκων τ' Ἀτρέως ἀνάστασιν.  
πόλιν δὲ δείξω τήνδε μακαριωτέραν  
ἢ τοὺς Ἀχαιοὺς, . . . (Eur. *Tro.* 361-66 [Murray])

She speaks here of several important points in the dramatic scheme of Euripides. She sees her coming marriage to Agamemnon as an axe hanging over her neck because she has foreseen the murder of Clytemnestra and her own—Clytemnestra, current wife to Agamemnon, has had an affair while he has been away at war, and will kill both him and Cassandra upon their return to Greece. Furthermore, Agamemnon's son and daughter will destroy Clytemnestra in retribution for the death of their father. When Cassandra arrives at Agamemnon's home at Mycenae, she experiences visions of the earlier bloody history of the place—visions of Thyestes who slept with his brother's wife and murdered his own children (Aesch. Ag. 1072-1347). Thus, she exhibits both sides of the mantic gift, the ability to see into the future, and the ability to understand the past.

When ancient writers have mentioned the activities of the Sibylline prophetesses, it seems that they have always referred to Cassandra among them (Parke 1988: 16). Her manner of prophecy—visions of events—was inspired by Apollo, and like the Sibyls, ‘she is essentially a clairvoyant rather than a medium’ (Parke 1988: 9). It is interesting to note that Helenus, Cassandra’s brother, was also a diviner of some skill. Furthermore, legend has it that the two of them were once left together in a temple of Apollo for the night and discovered in the morning asleep, with the sacred serpents ‘licking their ears’ (Parke 1988: 56), perhaps a sign of divine favour. Another seer with a gift like Cassandra’s was θεοκλύμενος θεοειδής—the godlike Theoclymenos, whom Homer (*Od.* 17. 151-161; 20. 351-6) spoke of at the end of the tale of Odysseus. Theoclymenos had inspired visions of events to come, one poetic vision in particular of the demise of the suitors, which is ‘the only clear example of ecstatic prophecy’ (Stanford 1965: 354) in Homer:

‘Oh wretches, what evil befalls you? Your heads and faces  
are covered in night, and your knees under you as well.  
Kindled is the lamentation, and signs of weeping are upon your cheeks,  
and blood spatters the walls and beautiful rafters;  
and the porch is full of phantoms, as is the court,  
phantoms that are hurrying into the gloom of Erebus...’

ἄ δειλοί, τί κακὸν τόδε πάσχετε; νυκτὶ μὲν ὑμέων  
εἰλύαται κεφαλαί τε πρόσωπά τε νέρθε τε γούνα,  
οἰμωγὴ δὲ δέδηκε, δεδάκρυνται δὲ παρειαί,  
αἶματι δ' ἑρράδαται τοῖχοι καλαί τε μεσόδμοι·  
εἰδῶλων δὲ πλεον πρόθυρον, πλείη δὲ καὶ αὐλή,  
ιεμένων Ἑρεβόσδε ὑπὸ ζόφον· . . . (Hom. *Od.* 20. 351-56 [Allen])

Including the above prophecy, Theoclymenos offers several important visions of future events at the conclusion of the *Odyssey*. His final prophecy is at *Od.* 20. 351-356, the above prophecy of the demise of the suitors. Another occurs at *Od.* 15. 525-534. In this prophecy, Theoclymenos reaches Ithaca in the company of Telemachus, who has had



no luck in finding Odysseus, his father, and Theoclymenos prophesies that it is the divine will that the house of Odysseus continue to rule Ithaca and thus the suitors will be unsuccessful. Lastly the Cassandra of Aeschylus' drama (Ag. 1264f) tells us a little about her dress that marks her as a diviner, namely a wand (σκῆπτρον) or staff, and her prophetic chaplets (μαντεῖα . . . στέφῃ) or necklace of divination. The wand or staff appears to have been the most common indicator of the office of diviner in ancient Greece. Teiresias bore a staff (χρῦσεον σκῆπτρον Hom. *Od.* 11. 91), the Pythia at Delphi held a 'sprig of laurel' while she prophesied, and even the poet held a wand to indicate his creative powers which were also granted by Apollo and the Muses (Morrison 1981: 93). At the beginning of his *Theogony* (lines 30-33), Hesiod claims that he himself received a wand of laurel from the Muses, as well as divine inspiration in the manner of a prophet or diviner. Artists, particularly because of the patronage of Apollo, were thus believed to be divinely inspired and therefore carried wands to indicate this fact.

There are several names in Zulu for the diviner.<sup>6</sup> In a very general sense, they may be called *inyanga*, a word that designates anyone 'skilled in a handicraft or profession' (Berglund 1976: 186) and thus is also used for the Zulu herbalist. The terms *ingoma* and *isangoma* can denote any diviner. Interestingly, one of Berglund's (1976: 186)

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<sup>6</sup> Bryant (1970: 9) provides a flamboyant description of what for him was the archetypal Zulu medicine man. I quote at length:

'Out in the full panoply of a professional progress, his body is betrimmed with a medley of the most fantastic trappings. A plume of feather waves above his head-ring, and a circlet of lion-claws surrounds his neck. Various cow-tails dangle from his arms and chest, supplementing the square strip of leopard-skin and the bundle of genet-tails that cover his nakedness behind and before. Numerous bunches of goat-horns, blackened with the smoke of his hut, and sundry small grass-woven baskets and bundles of rag-packages, brown with dirt, containing his strange assortment of drugs and charms, are strung from every point of vantage about neck, shoulders and body. A long pouch, holding his snuff-box, and made from the whole skin of an unborn calf dangles from his left hand, and in the other he carries his long walking staff or a couple of stout sticks.'

informants believed that these epithets were originally used for the diviners whose clients beat sticks upon the ground (*izibulo*) to agree with their pronouncements. The term *isanusi* 'practically always refers to a male diviner and describes men who have the ability of smelling out evil and *abathakathi*' (Berglund 1976: 185). However, there seem to be very few with this specific talent around today. There are also names for particular types of diviners, depending upon which 'tools' they use to perform their divinations.

As I noted earlier when discussing the nature of the mantic art at Delphi, the Zulu also believe in a twofold division of divination. For the Zulu, the *abemilozi* or diviners having familiar spirits (Callaway 1872: 177) are the highest and most revered form of diviner, because it is through them that the ancestors are given a voice. As Callaway (1872: 181f) explains, 'The spirits cannot divine by themselves; when they are going to divine their possessor [the diviner] goes with them. The possessor of them cannot divine; she usually says very little...' Like the Greeks, the diviners utilising some sort of technique may in turn be subdivided according to the many different forms of divination that exist.

The inspired vision appears to have been a common method of divination in early Greece. Similarly, the vision was a common method of divination for the Zulu. Not only did diviners who drew inspiration from their patron spirits use it, but it could also occur to any person who was in contact with the ancestors. One such example of this is King Shaka, perhaps the most famous of the Zulu monarchs who, on his deathbed, reportedly experienced powerful visions of the future of his kingdom, and said that:

‘...the descendants of the Zulu Nation would be awakened by the ringing of a gong and that there would be great animals with burning eyes that would travel at great speed along strange roads. With his dying breath he asked his brothers, after they had stabbed him, “Why are you killing me, my brothers? Do you think that by killing me you shall take this country of the Zulus and rule it? Oh no! The white swallows, the white men who build their huts out of wood shall take the country and rule it...”’ (Mutwa 1996: 180f)

A fragment (37 Rose) of Aristotle’s *On Philosophy* reports a similar situation in which Eudemus, a close friend of Aristotle, was terribly ill and actually came to prophesy his own recovery and eventual demise five years later, as well as the murder of Alexander, the tyrant of Pherae, which occurred a few days later. Furthermore, Socrates in Plato’s *Apology* (39c) says at his trial that he is at the point in life at which men most often act as diviners and utter prophecies, for he is about to be put to death.

There is another example of a Zulu seer, who like Cassandra, was not a professional diviner as one would consider the Pythia or a Sibyl, but still possessed mantic abilities. Henry Callaway (1870: 232-235) describes a man named Undayeni as possessing some sort of second sight. He ‘was a diviner though he did not divine; for he said what was true’ (Callaway 1870: 234), and ‘he was able to see things afar off from him’ (Callaway 1870: 232) in much the same way as Cassandra of Troy. An interesting observation is that he used to yawn and sneeze far more than a normal person, which according to Zulu belief marks the nearness of the ancestral spirits (Callaway 1870: 64 n. 24) and is also a good omen in Greek society, as were other ‘involuntary motions of the body’ (Halliday 1913: 174). This is because while one usually has complete control over one’s body, a sneeze is uncontrolled, and it is the sheer randomness of events like sneezes that the ancients thought special. In fact, they saw a sneeze as verifying the truth in



something that had just been said.<sup>7</sup> There is an example of this belief in the verifying power of the sneeze in Homer's *Odyssey* (17. 545-548) in which Telemachus sneezes nearby as his mother finishes speaking and Penelope concludes, 'You hear how my son sealed all I said with a sneeze?' Additionally, Berglund (1976: 137) reports that frequent belching and even hiccups are also indicators of the nearness of the ancestor shades.

Now the male-female dynamic requires some attention. At the beginning of his dissertation, Kingsford Mfusi (1984: 2) writes that '...the traditional doctor (*inyanga*) who is usually male and typically specializes in natural healing methods, for example herbal medicines, the diviner (*isangoma*) is traditionally female and operates within an indigenous religious supernatural context as culturally accepted medium with the ancestral shades...' Today in some cases this rigid gender restriction of male *inyanga* and female *isangoma* has begun to fall away, but through much of the history of Zulu divination, communing with the spirits has been the province of the woman (Mfusi 1984: 24). Ancient Greece provides us with some similar examples. In fact, Berglund (1976: 136) had an informant who believed that the preponderance of female diviners was because a woman could be called to become a diviner by the shades of both her own and her husband's lineage. However, it is Ngubane (1977: 77-99) who presents perhaps the most cogent explanation of both the gender restrictions on diviners and the place of women in Zulu society as a whole. In her chapter on the notion of spiritual pollution<sup>8</sup> she begins by stating that the Zulu hold pollution to be an actual state between life and death, a darkness called *umnyama* (Ngubane 1977: 77). The diviner

<sup>7</sup> Early on the Greeks identified the ψυχή (soul) with a person's head. Because the ψυχή was seen as an independent entity and a sneeze comes from one's head, it was believed that a sneeze was an independent confirmation from higher beings (Onians 1988: 95, 103).

<sup>8</sup> As Ngubane (1977: 77) writes, 'Among the Zulu the source of pollution is essentially a happening associated with 'birth' on the one hand and 'death' on the other.'

seems to dwell permanently in this darkness, which is not to say that a diviner is considered polluted. Rather, the diviner is believed to be incredibly pure because she exists in this 'marginal position between this world and the other world' (Ngubane 1977: 85). It is her nearness to the ancestor shades that causes this, and this is also her biggest problem, because she must live in a real world that is full of spiritual pollution. Therefore she must employ various rituals, sacrifices and prayers in order to maintain her spiritual wholesomeness (Ngubane 1977: 87). Lambert (1995: 78) writes that this belief in spiritual pollution being caused by birth and death is an idea held in common with the ancient Greeks.

The role of the dream in calling a Zulu to become either an *inyanga* or *isangoma* cannot be understated. Although there are also certain serious physical conditions that might suggest to one that the *amadlozi* are calling you to become a diviner or herbalist, without any accompanying dreams to suggest this the physical symptoms are merely some ailment or perhaps, if serious enough, an attack by witchcraft! Aside from the two signs that I have already mentioned, other indicators of the shades' call include 'frequent sneezing, yawning, belching and hiccups' (Berglund 1976: 137). Mfusi (1984: 64, table 4. 3. 1) performed interviews with both *izinyanga* and *izangoma* and found that in the majority of cases, 'the call' came in a dream made up primarily of supernatural content that he considered specifically Zulu. Mfusi (1984: 39-52) lists two primary dream elements in his observations, namely the snake and a relative, usually deceased and therefore indicating a link to the *amadlozi*. In particular, three of the four *izangoma* that Mfusi interviewed dreamed of the snake in some form, while all three of the *izinyanga* that he interviewed dreamed of their grandmothers passing on the secrets of Zulu herb lore. Because he is considered one of the ancient world's greatest

authorities on dreams and their interpretations, it is interesting to note that Artemidorus (2. 13) believes the snake represents a link with the earth and therefore, a link with the ancestors in both Greek and Zulu beliefs. According to Nilsson (1971: 324) the snake is often seen in this light in the ancient world as well, sometimes described as a 'soul animal'. From about 1500 to 1400 B. C. there is evidence of a cult of a snake goddess in Minoan Crete, a goddess who has on occasion been suggested as a goddess of the underworld. Nilsson (1971: 328f) disputes this notion, saying that the snake seems to have instead functioned as a protector of the house in which it lived. According to Nilsson (*ibid*) this cult has no connection to either early animism or the cult of the dead.<sup>9</sup> The myth of Teiresias that Apollodorus notes also involves snakes, and perhaps this links it into this earlier religious system of Minoan Crete. In Zulu culture, any diviner when having been told of these particular dreams and the accompanying physical symptoms, will immediately realise that the person is being called to be a diviner. The dream of a grandmother, who tends to be the most recently deceased member of the family to have practiced the art, is usually fairly explicit, with the grandmother often questioning the dreamer as to why they have not followed in their footsteps and become a diviner. It was commonly held in both Greek and Zulu beliefs that a dead person carried the will of the gods or ancestors and conveyed it to the dreamer. This is because, as mentioned earlier, the dead naturally have more of a relationship with deities and spirits that exist beyond our normal senses.

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<sup>9</sup> Zeus Meilichios was worshipped in snake aspect in ancient times. Harrison (1922: 18f) believes that Zeus essentially subsumed the role of some earlier Greek snake deity. Perhaps this is a link to the snake goddess of Crete.



Because the diviner in Zulu society was almost always female,<sup>10</sup> Mutwa (1996: 28) in listing and describing their accoutrement approaches the subject in feminine terms. The key elements were a wool wig that was woven with beads, a headband, and a leopard skin skirt. The wig and beads represent 'humility before God', while the headband indicates the 'purity of her thoughts'. Lastly the skirt is indicative of both 'honesty and courage'. On occasion the diviner has been known to wear a blood red blouse, symbolising that she is 'ready at any time to sacrifice herself in the service of the people' (Mutwa 1996: 28). Berglund (1976:155, 170) mentions that with the first animal sacrifice that marks the beginning of a novice's training, a length of skin is cut from the animal's back and worn by the student until she (or he) is finally initiated as a full diviner. It is called *inqwamba* (pl. *iminqwamba*). When this takes place, another length of skin is cut from a sacrifice and entwined around the first, indicating that the diviner is at last ready. Most of the diviners that Berglund (1976: 176) spoke to in fact said that they have these *iminqwamba* skins on all the time and cannot divine without them. Additionally, all who are trained as *izinyanga zamathambo* carry a small square cloth with them that must be black or at worst navy in colour. It is called *ingubo yamadlozi*, 'the cloth of the shades', and is used to create a shadow in which the bones may fall when thrown (Berglund 1976: 176). This is because the shades, which are responsible for the answers that appear in any session of divining, do not like bright light.

Modern psychology holds some useful insights into the mental state of the diviner. This approach tends to classify the diviner as an 'irrational' human being. In my opinion, this

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<sup>10</sup> This is a striking contrast to the Azande, of whom Evans-Pritchard noted that women are only rarely allowed to even touch their most sacred oracle—the poison oracle, in which not even a female fowl is used if at all possible (Evans-Pritchard: 1950: 283). For the Azande there is in fact an oracle called *mapingo* that is considered the oracle of women and children (Evans-Pritchard 1950: 358).

kind of judgement has no place in the context of Greek and Zulu beliefs, since this could be considered a largely 'irrational' context. This is because the belief in magic was prevalent in both cultures, and hence divination was something that most people held to be real and entirely logical. Therefore this was the 'rational' belief of the time. Modern science has however largely repudiated these beliefs, leaving psychology with the question: "What was it that made people believe they were diviners?" The position I have taken here is a relativist one because it is my opinion that in discussing something esoteric like magic or prophecy, the discussion must be carried out with the assertion in mind that the ancient peoples studied held magic to be a real and irrefutable phenomenon despite what modern western science has to say on the matter. When one approaches the category of magic as an emic category, it is to be understood as it stands within *one particular culture*, and although it might be comparable to another concept in another culture, the emic category will always lack some of the subtlety of the category to which it is being compared (Parker 2001: 320-321). Nowhere is this truer than in the study of religion, where for example, the Greeks understood religion to include sacrifices to the Olympian deities, the Zulu understood their religious sacrifice to be for the ancestor shades. In this way the Zulu would probably not call the activities of the Greeks religious, whereas the Greeks might dub Zulu practices as a form of necromancy. As Versnel (1991: 185) believes, research needs to be conducted in an etic manner, since, as is indicated in strict adherence to relativist principles, we can never know what something is like from within a culture (an emic category) unless we are members of that culture. For example, we can never truly understand the emic category of magic as it existed for the Greeks or the Zulu. This is because the category itself, in one culture may be delineated along different lines and thus include or exclude elements that the other culture does not (Parker 2001: 321). All of this subtlety and

nuance contributes to the misconceptions that occur when one tries to apply an emic categorization to a culture for which it was not designed. A good example of this is using a rational, western approach to the place of magic in a society like that of ancient Greece. It must however be emphasised that although there are observable similarities in these two culture's emic understandings of religion and magic, they are not always congruous, especially since the term 'magic' itself is often a highly objectionable one (Versnel 1991: 177-179). As Versnel (1991: 190) notes later on, the distinction between what can be called magical and what might be religious, is a subjective and culturally-biased opinion, since it is approached with emic comparisons predicated upon what these two concepts are believed to include within one's own society.

Returning to my earlier question of what could cause a person to believe that he or she has the power to divine, an anachronistic solution can be found in one of the symptoms of what psychologists call Schizotypal Personality Disorder. Apparently this is a fairly new diagnosis that was introduced into the DSM-III as a lesser form of Schizophrenia to differentiate between those suffering from full-blown schizophrenia and those with related ailments of a reduced severity (Nevid, Rathus & Greene 1997: 308). For the purposes of my argument however, the most important element of schizotypal disorder is a symptom referred to as 'magical thinking', which in essence is a belief that one possesses some sort of magical ability, ranging from being able to see the spirits of the dead, to having some precognitive or prescient ability. Other points of congruence between the schizotypal personality and a diviner include a measure of social isolation ('social contacts limited to essential everyday tasks'), recurrent illusions, sensing the presence of a force or person not actually present', and 'odd speech' meaning that one's conversation is 'digressive, vague, overelaborate, circumstantial, metaphorical' and the



like (DSM-III 1980: 312-313). In total the DSM-III lists eight related symptoms of schizotypal personality disorder. For one to be diagnosed, one only need manifest four of them, meaning that with the four symptoms mentioned above, a diviner could theoretically be diagnosed as schizotypal. What is also interesting is that the Zulu present a similar collection of strange behaviours that they see as befalling someone who is becoming a diviner:

‘The person is heard singing at night... Or he is observed to come home early in the morning, having been wandering about the country all night, bringing with him certain plants, which he tells them the spirits have pointed out to him, and revealed their medicinal powers. Or he leaves his home for an indefinite period on the mountains and in the open country; and comes back daubed with clay, which he says he has obtained by living for some time in a pool with the rainbow, which the natives suppose to be an animal; and having his body festooned with snakes.’ (Callaway 1872: 175)

In fact, Callaway (1872: 172) points out that the ability to divine first becomes apparent in a Zulu through ‘disturbances of the nervous system’. He wrote of ‘James’, a man called to become a diviner. His calling by the *amatongo* did apparently manifest as a physical reaction with what he called a ‘creeping’ sensation that began in his extremities and gradually spread to his entire body (Callaway 1870: 187), resulting finally in one of the classic signs of the favour and presence of the shades in Zulu custom, the feeling of a heaviness upon the shoulders (Callaway 1870: 159).

These are all common factors in the behaviour of the diviner in both a Zulu and a Greek context. As I noted in my introduction, the diviner is someone who is marginalized, someone who typically dwells outside of the bounds of the ‘normal’ community because of his or her apparent strangeness. Does this description typify all diviners as suffering from some sort of mental disorder? It would be foolish to make such a broad generalization, especially when Nevid, Rathus & Greene (1997: 308) tell us that only

three percent of any given population suffers from schizotypal disorder. Surely a statistic like this requires the rethinking of such an idea?<sup>11</sup> After all, Holger Kalweit (1987: 213) says ‘the psychotic [as in someone suffering from a mental disorder] is therefore no shaman, but shamans pass through psychotic episodes, venturing as they do to the edges of being’s abyss—and psychotics [who] pass sporadically through shamanic episodes, have genuine shamanic insights and glimpses into the higher world. This is why schizophrenia and epilepsy are, rightly venerated as “sacred diseases” by many peoples.’ Interestingly, Kalweit (1987: 215) goes on to that ‘in Africa, epilepsy is considered a sacred illness that is provoked by the spirits and that brings one into realms of higher knowledge.’ This bears a striking similarity to Greek beliefs during the time before the medical writings of Hippocrates.

If diviners are not *all* suffering from a schizotypal personality,<sup>12</sup> then what can be the explanation for their outlandish behaviour and supposed supernatural abilities? Of course there may well have been schizophrenic diviners, who, because of their illness, were able to appear to be speaking with some unseen entity or even to be possessed, but in my opinion this would certainly have been the exception and not the rule. Charlatans like Lucian’s Alexander of Abonoteichos, whom I have previously mentioned, would also have been common, and their ‘ministrations’ would have often soured the opinion of the public towards diviners. There are many examples of people vilifying diviners

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<sup>11</sup> A little arithmetic is necessary to clarify my position. At one stage the population of a certain city was estimated at being approximately one hundred thousand people. What this means is that there were (should every person with a schizotypal personality have become a diviner) three thousand diviners serving the city at that time, not to mention diviners with epilepsy or full-blown schizophrenia or even those diviners who were simply quacks and fraudsters!

<sup>12</sup> The Zulu refer to those who are called to divine as having a ‘soft head’ (Callaway 1991: 27), implying some sort of disorder, but all of this psychological theory is only useful for discussing the type of divination called ‘inspired’, or those diviners who commune with spirits or are possessed by gods.

and seers as money-grubbing and as preying upon the weak-minded.<sup>13</sup> The Zulu also had their charlatans, specifically among the diviners called *izinyanga zesitupa*, or ‘thumb diviners’ (Callaway 1872: 177). The procedure for enquiring of the thumb diviner is very simple. Those who wish to know something take sticks and beat them upon the ground whenever the diviner comes upon a correct answer. As Callaway (1872: 178) continues, ‘The natives themselves place very little confidence in doctors of this kind, but regard them as mere extortionists... They are called Amabuda, that is, babbling, talkative, lying deceivers.’<sup>14</sup> It is good to conclude here with the sentiment that Plutarch, a priest at the oracle of Delphi, expresses with his quotation of Euripides saying μόντις δ’ ἄριστος ὅστις εἰκάζει καλῶς or, the best diviner is he who guesses the best.

In approaching the topic of the figure of the diviner, I separated my investigation into two streams, the first was the Greek diviner and the second the Zulu diviner. I was able to separate what I called the ‘true diviner’ from the obvious psychotics and pretenders. I defined the ‘true diviner’ as someone who could, for reasons that cannot be explained, manifest the so-called magical power of the diviner (e. g. prophecy). Spirit mediums like the ancient Pythia of the Delphic oracle are an example of a type of ‘true diviner’. Others like Cassandra and Teiresias are also to be considered ‘true diviners’ but express their mantic abilities in prophetic visions that are not the result of total possession of the diviner by a spirit or other entity. As I established, the distinction between actual practicing diviners and people who can divine, must be maintained. The Delphic Pythia

<sup>13</sup> Just three examples: Aristophanes poking fun at lecanomancy (the use of some sort of reflective device, most often water in a bowl) *Ach.* 1117-1141; Oedipus accuses Creon of buying the seer Teiresias to prophesy what he wants, *Soph. O. T.* 380-403; *Soph. Ant.* 1055, ‘Prophets are all a money-getting tribe.’

<sup>14</sup> A point of comparison arises here between this definition of Callaway’s and the definition that Plato (*Laws* 909a-b) provides of the γόης, whom he considered synonymous with the πυχάγωγός, for he calls the γόης to be a ‘flattering, meddler, wandering, deceiver.’



or a trained *isangoma* can be considered to be real diviners, and thus have it as their profession. People the likes of King Shaka or Undayeni, both men despite the fact that women traditionally carried out most of the divining in the Zulu culture, are not diviners per se but do exhibit prophetic powers. I concluded with a look at the so-called dress code of the diviner, looking at what they wore to separate themselves from 'normal' people. The diviner is thus someone set apart, separate from the norm. The gods and spirits maintain this by selecting them for the duty of the *mantis*, the people maintain it by treating them as 'other' and 'strange', and the *mantis* maintains it by dressing in a way so as to proclaim their strangeness and separateness to all they interact with.

Chapter IV:How Did They Divine?

When Neo encounters the Oracle for the first time in the *Matrix*, he doesn't know what to expect or how this supposed wise woman is going to help him, if at all.<sup>1</sup> She is nothing like what he expects and is a simple grandmother baking cookies in the kitchen of a rundown apartment. Yet her mantic abilities are not visible to the naked eye. She is merely a guide (see Chapter 1) and tells Neo only what he needs to know to be able to act when the time calls for it. Her abilities are not gained through sacrifices or strange magic but the mantic powers of other diviners are, for from the darkest beginnings of divination there have always been as many rituals and techniques available to anyone seeking answers, as there have been societies and religious systems to employ them. Many of these forms were held in common throughout the ancient world, with the

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<sup>1</sup> *An old woman is huddled beside the oven, peering inside through a cracked door.*

**NEO:** Hello?

**ORACLE:** I know. You're Neo. Be right with you.

**NEO:** You're the Oracle?

**ORACLE:** Bingo. Not quite what you were expecting, right? I got to say I love seeing you non-believers. Always a pip. Almost done. Smell good, don't they?

**NEO:** Yeah.

**ORACLE:** I'd ask you to sit down, but you're not going to anyway. And don't worry about the vase.

**NEO:** What vase?

*He turns to look around and his elbow knocks a vase from the table. It breaks against the linoleum floor.*

**ORACLE:** That vase.

**NEO:** Shit, I'm sorry.

*She pulls out a tray of chocolate chip cookies and turns. She is an older woman, wearing big oven mitts, comfortable slacks and a print blouse. She looks like someone's grandma.*

**ORACLE:** I said don't worry about it. I'll get one of my kids to fix it.

**NEO:** How did you know...?

*She sets the cookie tray on a wooden hot pad.*

**ORACLE:** What's really going to bake your noodle later on is, would you still have broken it if I hadn't said anything?

*Smiling she lights a cigarette.*

method of dream interpretation possessing a far greater sphere of influence than even that. As I pointed out at the beginning of my first chapter, there existed a division or separation of the forms of divination. This division can be seen as being along similar lines for both the ancient Greeks and the Zulu, and is noticeable because of the reverence with which one form is treated over another. What I mean is that there existed in both societies a two-fold division among the various forms of divination, a division between inspirational and artificial forms of divining,<sup>2</sup> and this divide is noticeable particularly because of the reverent manner in which inspired diviners were treated. Oracular and inspired divination were therefore something separate, the province of the god Apollo, and later of Dionysus as well. This is all made clear especially in the dramatic and epic works of the period in question since almost every inquiry of substance was referred to either an inspired prophet or to one of the multitude of oracular sanctuaries that peppered the lands of the ancient world. I believe that this multiplicity of forms encountered by the student of divination can be explained using the ground that divination and magic have in common. This is because both seek contact for a variety of reasons, with something that is beyond our mortal understanding. To do this a symbolic language is required, the language of ritual.

Aristotle in his *Politics* (1253a) referred to man as a 'political animal' (πολιτικὸν ζῷον) but perhaps man should be conceived of as a ritual animal, for we require rituals in our daily lives and in our religious activities for a variety of reasons, but primarily for the psychological affirmation of the self, in a manner comparable to that of the obsessive neurosis of Sigmund Freud's day.<sup>3</sup> But what of magical divination and rituals

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<sup>2</sup> Prophecy granted through the power or presence of a god or spirit entity, and prophecy through the use of a learned method that was created by mortals.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the obsessive neurosis see Freud (tr. J. Strachey 1991). Freud (tr. J. Strachey 1990: 31) in fact contended that there was a good deal more than just similarity between religious ritual acts and



employed for those purposes? Thomassen (1999: 55) asks the question: 'is magic a subclass of ritual?' In his paper he seeks to be able to provide some sort of classification for the concept of magic, since earlier work in the study of religion made it a point to separate magic and religion entirely. In his discussion, Thomassen (1999: 63) posits the notion that the purpose of ritual might be the creation of 'balance' of powers between the person who performs it and the populace and its needs as a whole. Magic is a special situation in which this balance is tampered with, to the benefit of one individual—the magician. It is important to remember that 'normal rituals *communicate* [my italics] by means of a code of significations shared by a [religious] community' (Thomassen 1999: 64). This is not the purpose of ritual in a magical context, for magic is secretive, its methods and language known only to those who are intimately familiar with it. Magic does not use ritual to share supernatural power, as is its aim in religion, but instead seeks to seize power and concentrate it solely in the hands of the magician. As Thomassen (1999: 65) summarises, 'magic is the appropriation of ritual power for personal ends'. This means that while ritual should not be considered magical, especially in a religious context, magic almost perverts the communally empowering nature of ritual to empower the individual. Divination makes use of magic to answer questions, whether the answers are for one's individual interests or in the interests of the community in general. Now the art of Divination can be seen to employ many disparate rituals and techniques in its practice. Lloyd (1979: 2) believes that a magical act is 'expressive or symbolic' and should therefore be evaluated on the basis of 'whether it has been carried out appropriately or not'. It is the ritual that is truly

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neurotic obsession. He (Freud, tr. J. Strachey 1990: 33) believed the two shared the following commonalities: '...in the qualms of conscience brought on by their neglect, in their complete isolation from all other actions (shown in the prohibition against interruption) and in the conscientiousness with which they are carried out in every detail.' An additional point of congruency is the symbolism of the ritualised action itself, which is linked to the doctrinal teachings of a faith in the case of a religious ritual, and which concerns the indirect expression of unconscious wishes in the case of an obsession or compulsion.

important to the magician. Although the wizard does seek some manifest effect, his or her emphasis is always on performing the rituals and incantations involved perfectly. It is the ritual of the magical action that allows the magician 'to express himself effectively' (Halliday 1913: 26), to give symbolic representation to feelings and emotions, to place him/herself within the weave of the cosmos in an entirely distinctive way. It could be said then that the form of divination has a habit of *choosing* the diviner who practices it, particularly in the case of inspired divination, for the diviner ultimately employs the rituals with which he or she is most comfortable and familiar. Before I begin with the nuts-and-bolts of the investigation I would like to point out that I have chosen to change my approach to compiling the evidence in this chapter. I have chosen to present comparisons and differences between the Zulu and the Greeks wherever they might arise in the discussion, instead of describing the two cultures in isolation. Hopefully this new format will allow the similarities to be brought out more strongly than before.

The dream is the exception to this rule and so, it is a good place to begin a discussion of the various rites of divination. Unless one is participating in what is called an incubation, a magical ritual that has its basis in sleep, there are of course no mystical rites necessary to evoke dreams, and therefore the dream was perceived by both the Greeks and the Zulu as one of the oldest, least expensive (one does not usually have to pay to fall asleep), and most accessible forms of divination available to anyone, and it can tell the dreamer about the past, the present, or the future, or even supposedly carry a message from the gods, daemons and departed relations. Dreams are truly a part of the popular imagination, and it is also because of this universal appeal that it is easiest to broach the subject of dream divination first.

A comment made by a participant in Plutarch's *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men* (*Mor.* 158-9) calls the dream 'our most ancient and respected form of divination.' The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (tr. W. Kaufmann 1976: 52) in fact wrote that it was because of dreams that men believed in the existence of a spirit realm in the first place. This was due to the fact that dreams made us believe we had entered 'another real world', and we came to imagine that this was where gods resided and where spirits came from. Several kinds of dreams have been described by commentators, among them prophetic dreams, dreams composed of the sights and sounds of the day, and so-called 'healing' dreams, which would be characterised particularly by the experiences of patients at places like the sanctuaries of Asclepius. (These are the incubations that I mentioned earlier.) Although I shall touch on all three of the above, I will concentrate on prophetic dreams with 'healing' dreams as an adjunct, since the instructions for cures were often in the form of oracular responses. In this section I will only be highlighting the important stages in the development of Greek oneiromancy. This will of course include Hesiod, Homer, Hippocrates, and Plato. Minor reference will be made to Artemidorus, who, although he wrote outside of the period that I have designated for study, possesses some interesting insights into the nature and understanding of the dream in ancient Greece.

The beginning of Greek dream theory comes to us in the form of the poetry of Homer and Hesiod. Although not chronological, I will address the writings of Hesiod first, because his *Theogony* describes the state of the universe at its beginnings. In the *Theogony* (211-220), Hesiod describes 'dreams' as dwelling deep within the earth. He also says that they are the children of Νύξ, the Night, and while the dreams themselves



are largely neutral, their mother is decidedly malevolent in aspect. The beginning of book 24 of Homer's *Odyssey* once more illustrates this point when the god Hermes leads the souls of the dead suitors down to the House of Hades after Odysseus has confronted and killed them.<sup>4</sup>

Homer, through the character of Penelope, wife of the long-suffering Odysseus, presents this theory of where dreams come from:

'Stranger, know that on one hand dreams are inexplicable and very difficult to interpret, and that they do not all find completion for mankind. For there exist two gates for the barely visible dreams; one is constructed of horn, and the other of ivory; those dreams that come through the gate of sawn ivory, they seek to trick us, carrying fruitless words; and those that come through the gate of polished horn, their truths come to pass, once mortals see them.'

ξεῖν', ἧ τοι μὲν ὄνειροι ἀμήχανοι ἀκριτόμυθοι  
γίνοντ', οὐδέ τι πάντα τελείεται ἀνθρώποισι.  
δοιαὶ γάρ τε πύλαι ἀμνηνῶν εἰσὶν ὀνείρων·  
αἱ μὲν γὰρ κεράεσσι τετεύχεται, αἱ δ' ἐλέφαντι.  
τῶν οἱ μὲν κ' ἔλθωσι διὰ πριστοῦ ἐλέφαντος,  
οἳ ῥ' ἐλεφαίρονται, ἔπε' ἀκράαντα φέροντες·  
οἱ δὲ διὰ ξεστῶν κεράων ἔλθωσι θύραζε,  
οἳ ῥ' ἔτυμα κραίνουσι, βροτῶν ὅτε κέν τις ἴδῃται. (Hom. *Od.* 19. 560-567  
[Allen])

Van Lieshout (1980: 38f) suggests a 'bio-psychological' explanation of the idea of these two gates. For the ancients there was some association of ivory with the mouth, or more particularly one's teeth, and therefore with the spoken word. Horn was associated with one's eyes. More weight was always given to that which was seen when deciding on what the truth was. Here one only needs to think of the early Greek historians like Herodotus, who in writing his *Histories*, continually emphasises that which he has seen

<sup>4</sup> A close association can be seen here between sleep, dreams and death, especially since the golden wand that Hermes is said to have carried with him had the additional power of being able to put mortals to sleep and wake them up as well. This close association is also evident in the fact that ghosts and the spirits of the ancestors are thought to regularly communicate with the living in their dreams (Ogden 2001: 77f).

with his own eyes (For example, at 1. 183, he begins to tell his readers that he saw Babylon, and continues on to describe some of its detail; and at 1. 201, he is at pains to point out that he is working entirely from what others have said.). Thus it can be suggested that there was a distrust of that which was heard, and therefore of dreams from the Gate of Ivory, while dreams from the Gate of Horn were believed. Why should this notion of the gates of dreams be important to the study of divination? The two types of dreams—those from the gate of horn that are true, and those from the gate of ivory that are false—indicate an underlying belief, namely that dreams are harbingers, carrying messages of what the future might hold. These messages might be true or false, a discrimination that established early on in Greek history that dreams could be prophetic and therefore used for the purposes of divination. Therefore, early archaic belief divided dreams into two categories and thereby put them ‘outside the real cosmos, in immediate proximity to the world of nonexistence, the other world, that of the dead’ (Brelich 1966: 294).

Homer uses two terms to refer to dreams in his epic, the *Iliad*: θεῖος, indicating that dreams are sent by or caused by the gods (LSJ *sv* θεῖος), and οὔλος, which conveys a sense of fatality or destructiveness (LSJ *sv* οὔλος). It is interesting to note that the LSJ states an additional epic meaning for οὔλος, which can mean complete or whole. This is a confirmation of the double nature of dreaming that Penelope suggested. For the Homeric Greeks, the dream was thus a double-edged sword that could be sent from the gods with pertinent information about the future, or sent with the purpose of leading the dreamer astray. Despite the fact that there seems to be a strong link to older chthonic religions in early Greek dream theory (Van Lieshout 1980: 34-27), with the physical positioning of the Gates of Dreams being an example of this, the gods were still able to

craft dreams for their own devices and send them upon humans. These were ideas that bore much weight throughout most of antiquity.

In the *Iliad* (2. 1-23) Homer describes how Zeus summons a dream and orders it to go to Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek expedition at Troy, in order to mislead him. The dream is a personification called Oneiros, who is a divine messenger (Van Lieshout 1980: 36). In this situation he carries misinformation by assuming the form of Nestor, whose advice Agamemnon trusts most. The dream stands at Agamemnon's head to convey its message.<sup>5</sup> The dream here takes on the actual form of a human being. Zeus has crafted this particular dream after the man whom Agamemnon most respects (Nestor) so that his deception will be complete and the advice that the dream imparts will be heeded. This idea of the dream being physically manifest in human form is therefore not mere poetics but a statement of a belief that was common in ancient Greece.<sup>6</sup> And what is more, Agamemnon trusts the fact that this is a vision of the wise Nestor, the sight of whom, must confirm the truth of the dream if the belief in its validity is based upon the logic of Van Lieshout's 'bio-psychological' understanding of the Gates of Dreams. Kirk (1985: 116) believes that the fact that the spectre chose to stand at Agamemnon's head (see footnote 4 above) is also significant, in that it allows for easy access to his eyes and ears, and thus easy access to the man's mind. There is another example of a manifest dream taking shape at someone's head in the *Odyssey* (4. 795-841), in which Athene takes on the form of Iphthime and stands at Penelope's head while she slumbers, and convinces her that both Odysseus and her son, Telemachus are safe.

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<sup>5</sup> στῆ δ' ἄρ' ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς Νηληϊῆφ υἱὶ ἑοικώς,  
 Νέστορι, τὸν ῥα μάλιστα γερόντων τίτ' Ἀγαμέμνων·  
 τῷ μιν ἐιστάμενος προσεφώνεε θεῖος Ὀνειρος· (Hom. *Il.* 2. 20-23) [Monro & Allen]

<sup>6</sup> For further study of dreams around the time of Homer, see Messer (1918), Dodds (1951) and Kessels (1978).



Brelich (1966: 300) believes oneiromancy, or the art of dream interpretation, to be something that is not entirely 'Greek'. He suggests that it is either a 'survival' from some time in the history of Greece prior to the development of any of the more established cults. Another proposition of Brelich's is that oneiromancy is something that the Greeks 'borrowed' from their early encounters with neighbouring cultures, and then sidelined to a large extent when they developed their own forms of divination. The former proposition is probably the most accurate for two reasons; firstly, the dream seems to have pride of place in the magical beliefs of the archaic period, which necessarily means that there had to be some sort of earlier history for the use of dream divination. Secondly, modern studies of truly ancient forms of divining like necromancy suggest that early on, the dream was a major part of chthonically-based rituals (Ogden 2001: 76-77), probably the original cults of ancient Greece and the basis for the cult of the dead, meaning that the favoured position of dream divination developed from its earlier usage in incubations and necromantic divination. Because of this, divination through the interpretation of dreams persisted, particularly in the popular imagination, as is evidenced by the works of dramatists like Aeschylus. My first example is from the *Choēphoroi* (lines 22-107) in which the Chorus, a group of female servants, emerge from the palace accompanied by Electra. They have been ordered to make libations at the tomb of Agamemnon after Clytemnestra had a terrible dream the night before. According to the resident dream interpreters the dream is indicative of the anger of Agamemnon and Cassandra, whom Clytemnestra murdered. Dreams were not merely a means of advancing the plot for the author or playwright, but were more importantly 'the means by which the dead revealed the future to the living' (Halliday 1913: 130). This relationship between the living and the dead is further

illustrated in a scene from Aeschylus' *Persae* (176-231). The belief that a dream can be sent by a deceased relative or ancestor is certainly a common one, especially within the context of the magico-religious attitudes of the Greeks and the Zulu. This notion of the dream as communicating between living and dead harkens back to necromantic rites and the incubations that were employed for divination at the *nekuomanteia* of the ancient world (Ogden 2001: 76).

Plato, in his *Symposium* (202-203b), has the character of Diotima explain that there is a Δαίμων μέγας (202) or Great Spirit that is responsible for interceding between the gods and human beings. This δαίμων<sup>7</sup> is also what allows for the powers of magic and divination, in essence acting as a conduit passing power and knowledge from the supreme gods to us mere mortals, both when we are awake and asleep. This is important because not only does Plato's δαίμων allow for the wizard to perform magical and divinatory rituals in a normal way, but it also allows ordinary people to be able to divine whilst asleep and in the special case of incubations. In the *Timaeus* (71 d-e), Plato is also concerned with the role that the soul plays in divination. According to him the gods put τὸ μαντεῖον within all human beings. Now Plato is not referring to divination itself with this phrase, but rather as Bury translated it, to an 'organ of divination', something that the gods fixed within us to allow all of us to see the future to some degree, or as Plato believed, to find some measure of truth in our otherwise shadowy existence. An important point in Plato's (*Ti.* 71 d-e) understanding of the practice of divination is his belief that the intellect of the diviner must essentially be set aside for true divination to occur. This is the result of one of two situations; either the person is asleep, and as Hippocrates (*Reg. IV.* 86) believed, the soul is then responsible

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<sup>7</sup> Our modern word demon stems from this Greek term. Although the word today carries with it evil connotations, due largely to Christianity, originally it was as Diotima said, a spiritual intercessor between gods and men.

for the running of things and thus the person is able to divine with their dreams, or the person must be in some sort of ‘deranged’ state—the examples that Plato gives are suffering with some disease or actual mantic inspiration—μαντικῇ ἐνθεῳ (Plato *Phaed.* 244b). This is because Plato (*Meno* 99 b-c [Burnet]) believed that in true divination, like in sleep, the diviner knew nothing of what occurred—καὶ γὰρ οὔτοι ἐνθουσιῶντες λέγουσιν μὲν ἀληθῆ καὶ πολλά, ἴσασι δὲ οὐδὲν ὧν λέγουσιν. It is interesting to see Plato vacillating between different understandings of the importance of dreams. In the *Republic* (382-383) for example, Plato shows one possibility by saying that because the Divine must be free of all falsehood, it cannot of necessity send false dreams and visions to people as in the case of Agamemnon (Hom. *Il.* 2). However, in the *Theaetetus* (158 b) Plato suggests that people can be deluded by both dreams and the various forms of μανία. Ultimately, he doesn’t seem to be sure of whether or not he should accept the validity of divination that employs the dream as its mechanism (Hanson 1980: 1399), despite the fact that he says that it is only in dreams and in madness that true divination can take place. Thus it seems that Plato’s understanding of dreams has returned to the earlier Homeric true/false dichotomy of the Gates of Dreams, in that only certain dreams can be used for the purposes of divination. However, when one looks at Plato’s belief in the absolute truth that must exist in the divine, the Gates of Dreams become an obsolete concept as the dream then becomes purely another means through which the gods and spirits reveal the truth of the universe to their adherents.

Moving away from the world of the supernatural to the biological and psychological, I wish to reflect upon portions of *Regimen IV*, a text of the Hippocratic corpus that is devoted entirely to the subject of dreams. *Regimen IV* (86) indicates that even the



medical practice of the Greek classical period had some belief in the power of dream divination. As Hippocrates (*Reg. IV. 86*) wrote, 'for the body in sleeping does not perceive [with the senses] but the waking soul knows all, and sees the visible, hears the audible, walks, touches, suffers pain, ponders.'<sup>8</sup> He goes on to say (*Hippoc. Reg. IV. 88*) that when one experiences the occurrences of the day in a dream in an orderly and proper manner, typically as they happened or as one plans them to happen, then good health is indicated for the dreamer. In a similar manner, should the events of the dream not equate with those of the day, then some problem is indicated.<sup>9</sup>

Like Homer, Artemidorus of Daldis (1. 1) wrote that there exist two types of dreams. In essence the Homeric true/false dichotomy still exists for Artemidorus. There is the *ὄνειρος*, which predicts future happenings and thus future truths, and the *ἐνύπνιος*, which I would like to explain using a Freudian (1976: 82-105) typology found in the *Interpretation of Dreams* since his categorization seems quite apt. Freud writes that there are four sources for dreams, or in this case, for *ἐνύπνια* (the plural form)—'external sensory stimuli', 'internal (subjective) sensory excitations', 'internal organic somatic stimuli', and 'psychical sources of stimulation'. I will not endeavour to explain that which Freud himself has set down so eloquently, other than to say that what I mean by using his categories for dream derivation is that the *ἐνύπνιος* can be explained by purely rational and scientific means. The sources named above include things like

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<sup>8</sup> Τὸ μὲν γὰρ σῶμα καθεύδον οὐκ αἰσθάνεται, ἡ δ' ἐγρηγορούσα γινώσκει, καθορῇ τε τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ διακούει τὰ ἀκουστὰ, βαδίζει, ψαύει, λυπέεται, ἐνθυμέεται... [Littre]

<sup>9</sup> The first century A. D. author Artemidorus of Daldis, provides evidence for this notion with his catalogue of dreams and their various interpretations (*Artem. 1. 3*), showing that for close to a thousand years the ordered and normal were good omens for the ancient Greeks. In fact, even Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, wrote that 'by picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future' (Freud, tr. J. Strachey 1976: 783). However, Artemidorus (1. 3) does note that sometimes this can depend upon the dreamer. A thief for example, would not see a beautiful, clear day as a good omen for his clandestine activities, despite their being normal and natural.

hearing a certain sound while sleeping (an external stimulus), having an upset stomach (internal organic stimulus), or the incorporation of past memories into the dream (psychical stimulus). There is therefore nothing divinatory about the ἐνύπνιος type dream. It does not reveal *truth*. By contrast, the ὄνειρος dream can be sorted into three categories of its own—the ‘symbolic dream’ where the imagery within the dream itself is interpreted to give some sort of a prediction, the ὄραμα, which simply shows the dreamer a future event as it will take place, and the χρηματισμός which entails the revelation of an event to the dreamer by some deity or spirit power (Dodds 1951: 107). Artemidorus in his catalogue of dream interpretation still retains the original Horn and Ivory idea of the archaic period, with his predictive ὄνειρος and more naturally based ἐνύπνιος. It is apparent that the notion of the Gates of Dreams was a highly influential one that impacted upon the state of Greek oneiromancy all through its history. Having delineated between predictive and ‘regular’ dreams, Dodds (1951: 105) also points out that the Greeks never reported ‘*having* a dream, but always... *seeing* a dream’. (The phrase used often in the Greek is ὄναρ ἰδεῖν.) This nuance in the language is an indicator of how the dream was perceived in general—as a visionary *experience*, almost an ἐνθεος type of experience. This emphasis on the reality of the seen and the visible that I addressed earlier was of course a common one for the ancients. As Plato (*Ti.* 71e [Burnet]) wrote, ‘nobody can claim true and inspired divination when sensible, but only when the power of thought is chained by sleep or through disease or alternately through some divine inspiration.’<sup>10</sup>

Now, as to the phenomenon of dream oracles used in the cult of Asclepius, the quality of the evidence is such that it is either biased on behalf of the cult and its activities, or is

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<sup>10</sup> οὐδεις γὰρ ἔννους ἐφάπτεται μαντικῆς ἐνθέου καὶ ἀληθοῦς, ἀλλ’ ἢ καθ’ ὕπνον τὴν τῆς φρονήσεως πεδηθεὶς δύναμιν ἢ διὰ νόσον ἢ διὰ τινα ἐνθουσιασμόν παραλλάξας.

biased against them. There does not exist a truly unbiased account of the activities at the Asclepieia, the centres of healing in the Asclepius cult. Despite this uncertainty, one thing is certain—people throughout antiquity went to the Asclepieia (Edelstein & Edelstein 1998: 147). Surely the patient turnover that these healing centres had would not have been as high if, as rational thought would dictate, nothing happened and nobody was ever healed. Perhaps it is best to explain what went on at these Asclepieia before looking at this problem.

Asclepius was not always a god for the ancients. In fact the first definitive reference to his godhood occurs on an Athenian inscription dated to 420 B.C. (Edelstein & Edelstein 1998: 66). Originally he was a hero, famous for his medical skills. Homer (*Il.* 4. 194) calls him the 'blameless physician', and in truth, his only reason for mentioning Asclepius at all is because he is the father of Machaon and Podalirius, two warriors who fought at Troy and, who because of their father's gifts, are also able medics (Edelstein & Edelstein 1998: 6-8). Pindar (*Pyth.* 2) and Apollodoros (3) tell the actual myth of Asclepius himself. They wrote that Asclepius was the son of Apollo, who beside his portfolio of prophecy, also held those of medicine and disease. It is here that Asclepius first received his medical gifts. Later he honed them by the teachings of Chiron, the wise centaur. Xenophon (*Cyn.* 1. 1-6) tells us that it was the task of Asclepius to raise the dead and heal the sick, and this is exactly what he did at the Asclepieia.

When Asclepius was most often represented in a statue, he was typically pictured as a bearded, middle-aged man of gentle countenance, with a staff in hand, the staff often entwined with a snake, symbolic of regeneration (Edelstein & Edelstein 1998: 151). The staff is also similar to the wand borne by Hermes, the soul guide of the gods, 'an



appropriate symbol for the gods of dreams' (Edelstein & Edelstein 1998: 225-228). Some representations also picture him wearing a wreath of laurel upon his head (*ibid*). When he manifested himself to patients in the Asclepieia, he was never awe- or fear-inspiring in aspect but always calming and peaceful (Edelstein & Edelstein 1998: 151). He went as a physician to a patient and was sensitive to their needs. Therefore, anyone, whether he believed in the god's power or not, could approach Asclepius at one of his sanctuaries and be healed. All one had to do beforehand was have a cleansing bath and offer the necessary sacrifice (Edelstein & Edelstein 1998: 148-149). There were no strange practices as occurred at some religious institutions as the god himself had said, ἀγνεία δ' ἐστὶ φρονεῖν ὅσια or, 'purity means to think holy thoughts' (Porph. *Abst.* 2. 19). This was all that was required of the suppliant. There is nothing exceptional about the way that Asclepius appeared to the suppliant. More often than not this would occur in the form of a dream vision, for this was the 'means by which God and men were supposed to communicate' (Edelstein & Edelstein 1998: 157). The Edelsteins believe there is nothing strange or untoward in this. All of the members of the Greek pantheon of gods manifested themselves to mortals in dreams. It does seem that Asclepius, because of the constant stream of patients to the Asclepieia, did this considerably more often than any other deity.

It is through the medium of dream oracles that this manifestation to the sleeping suppliant was accomplished. The suppliant usually spent the night in the great hall of the sanctuary near to the statue of Asclepius, or in some cases they slept in special areas built for the purposes of the dream visions. During the night Asclepius would appear to them in their dreams, ask them to explain their ailment, and then proceed to recommend a course of treatment (Edelstein & Edelstein 1998: 149-151). It was all quite rational

barring the fact that all of this took place in a dream. The divining dream in the form of the process of incubation was the primary resource involved in the practice of medicine at the Asclepieia. The dream-vision, a manifestation of the god Asclepius, was a true dream to be believed by the incubant and taken at face value by all concerned—from the patient to the priests at the sanctuary.

In terms of the relationship between Asclepius and Greek rational medicine, it is important to remember that although a god, Asclepius in large part behaved as a doctor, giving advice on diet or exercise, or even performing surgeries to heal supplicants at the Asclepieia. As the Edelsteins (1998: 139) noted, 'Greek physicians never opposed religious medicine, much as they abhorred magic.' This attitude of hostility towards the occult is patently obvious in the Hippocratic text *On the Sacred Disease* (2. 1-10),<sup>11</sup> wherein the author disparages practitioners of magical healing at almost every turn. This was not so of the attitude of doctors and men of science towards the Asclepieia, who believed in the curative powers of these sanctuaries despite being unable to explain them in a rational manner. In fact, the development of Greek rational medicine can be seen to mirror the development of the cult practice at the Asclepieia. Initially Asclepius performed many miracles to cure those who came seeking his aid, but later, as scientific medicine comes to the forefront, he seems to leave behind his image of θαυματουργός and takes on the persona of physician in terms of the way that he behaves towards his supplicants. Even though he still performs some miracle cures, Asclepius tends to instead prescribe changes in diet or exercise regimen and the like, rather encouraging people to explore options for cures that they might never have tried (Edelstein & Edelstein 1998: 152, 171).

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<sup>11</sup> *On the Sacred Disease* and the other medical works attributed to Hippocrates and his followers are roughly dated to the period 550 - 450 B. C.

Like the Greeks, the Zulu believe in many ways of communicating with the spirit realm or divining, including dreams, ecstasies, possession, actual divination procedures performed by a qualified *isangoma*, and the transformation of a shade into some animal form, usually a certain snake, in order to deliver a message (Du Toit 1959: 125-131). The dream is highly valued in Zulu society as a means of learning the will of the shades and also as a way of glimpsing the future. Divining with one's dreams also has a history in the Zulu culture and it was greatly respected, for like the necromantic incubations of ancient Greek *nekuomanteia*, Zulu dreams often made contact with the shades of the dead. Drummond (1875: 147) wrote that 'dreams they [the Zulu] are devout believers in, and they will curiously turn and twist any event of the day, so as to make it coincide with the vision of the night.' First of all, it must be realized that Drummond was writing at a time when non-western societies tended to be viewed as irrational and superstitious. Nevertheless, I believe that there is a universal kernel of truth in his perceptions, as it seems to be the nature of any people that believes in the prophetic power of dreams to try and fit one's apparently prophetic vision to the experiences that come later.

Dreams are very important to the structure and maintenance of Zulu beliefs. Berglund (1976: 98) provides the interesting example of a man who refused to leave home to seek employment because he had not received the sanction of his shades in a dream. Du Toit (1959: 126) describes just how seriously the Zulu treat a dream that is believed to be a warning of impending danger, and Callaway (1870: 229) affirms this position with a reported comment from an informant who experienced a warning dream—'What do I want further, when the *Itongo* has already told me that I am going into danger?'



A dream experienced in the daytime is usually ignored 'because that is not the time for dreaming', while dreams at night are full of valuable content because 'this is the time of the shades and of witchcraft' (Berglund 1976: 102). Once again we are reminded of the Gates of Dreams with only dreams occurring at night being taken seriously. Before continuing I must emphasize that the phenomenon of witchcraft or *abathakathi* is something very real in the life of a Zulu traditionalist and was also something of great concern to the ancient Greeks. This does not mean that everybody went around accusing his neighbours of being witches! On the contrary, for to make an accusation of witchcraft is an extremely serious affair, and something resorted to only in the darkest of circumstances. Furthermore, before making any accusation, all other explanations for a particular series of misfortunes are investigated and the accuser will also visit several *amasangoma* (diviners) to make certain that it is witchcraft that is responsible. Then, and only then, will he make the accusation that is then taken before another neutral diviner (Ngubane 1977: 41). Witchcraft therefore, is taken very seriously, both because of the impact that such an accusation can have on the community, but also because of the impact that it can have on the bewitched individual's life and psyche.

In terms of the dream in Zulu beliefs, the first distinction made between types is this—there are important dreams and unimportant dreams, or rather, useful dreams (those occurring in the night) and useless dreams ('day dreams'). It is the dreams that take place at night that are important for discerning the presence of witchcraft and understanding the will of the shades and the path of the future. As one of Berglund's informants (1976: 79) said, 'To dream is to see the truth at night. If a man says something and you dream about it at night and see it differently at night, then you know that the man is misleading you. It is the dream that shows the truth, because the Shades

never deceive their children.’ Just like the Greeks, the Zulu thought that some dreams could be a vision of the truth, of how things must be. Now although the shades can often be seen and heard in one’s dreams<sup>12</sup> their presence can quite literally be felt or experienced in a manner similar to the Greek belief as evidence by their ὄναρ ἰδεῖν phrase. When someone who has dreamed awakens the following morning with pain in their shoulders, this is taken as an indication of the presence of the shades with that individual. It is believed that they probably received a visit from their shades the preceding evening (Berglund 1976: 98). A Zulu convention that at first does not seem to have any Greek parallel is the notion that dreams occurring in the summertime have more of a tendency to come true than those of the winter months. As Callaway’s (1870: 238) informant puts it, ‘summer dreams do not usually miss the mark.’ However, should one conceive of this in terms of the specific period of operation of the Delphic oracle for example, an hypothesis may be made. As I will again note in my section on oracular divination, the oracle at Delphi only operated at particular times during the year and so during the winter months it was closed down. I believe that a similarity in belief does exist here between the fact that the Delphians refused to operate the oracle in winter and that the Zulu did not trust the visions of a dream that occurred in the same time period. Perhaps the reason was ultimately as Callaway’s (1870: 238) informant suggested, namely that the winter seemed to produce ‘confused imaginations’ when it came to divination and both peoples therefore shied away from it for the cold months.

The dream is also vital for the practices of the *inyanga* and *isangoma*, more so however for the *isangoma*. It is through dreams that people are called to both professions, usually by a deceased relative who once practiced the art, in the case of the *inyanga*, and

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<sup>12</sup> They are described as being white, a reference that has both connotations of goodness and opacity (Berglund 1976: 371).

usually by strange visionary dreams involving snakes in the case of the *isangoma* (Mfusi 1984: 39-52). The 'call' of an *isangoma* or *inyanga* is said to involve largely supernatural elements peculiar to the Zulu cultural context (Mfusi 1984: 64). While the snake is a very common symbol,<sup>13</sup> the connection that the snake has to the earth and therefore, the shades, provides it with the necessary impetus to make it a formal element of most diviners' dreams. The strong connection with the earth provides a link to early Greek dream divination and incubation as practiced in necromancy and other related chthonic rituals. In parallel to Plato's notion of an 'organ of divination', Callaway (1870: 183) wrote that something the Zulu term a 'spirit of divination', which when sent by the ancestors, is responsible for someone either being able to divine or being called to become a diviner. According to his informants, it is when this spirit comes upon a person that they begin to experience the dreams and other symptoms that are related to the call of a diviner. A more precisely related phenomenon is also recorded by Callaway (1870: 338). His informant said, 'There is among black men a something which is divination within them. When anything valuable is lost, they look for it at once; when they cannot find it, each one begins to practice this inner divination, trying to feel where the thing is; for not being able to see it, he feels internally a pointing, which tells him if he will go down to such a place, it is there, and he will find it...' This notion of a sort of universal Extra Sensory Perception provides an interesting counterpoint to Greek beliefs, since the Greeks had no conception (perhaps barring Plato's earlier speculations) of the 'mass' use of mantic abilities. Dreams are one of the major components in the practice of any *isangoma*. Because they serve as the link

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<sup>13</sup> Freud (tr. J Strachey 1991: 189) equates the snake with male sexuality and sex organs. In this situation I would have to disagree with a sexual explanation of the snake in the dreams of a diviner. The snake appears to provide a direct link with the shades, which have the ability to transform themselves into a certain snake. Furthermore, the more universal idea that snakes represent regeneration and rebirth also seems appropriate, as the person is essentially leaving their old life to be born again as a diviner, a person seen as sacrosanct because of their close affinity with the shades.



between the living and the shades they enable the diviner to communicate with the shades and find out what, if anything the problem might be. Dreams are also the medium through which the diviner receives instructions on how to effect cures where necessary. Finally, these dreams are believed to be actual experiences in which the diviner's spirit, like a shaman's, leaves the body and ventures into the realm of the shades. Again this kind of idea is in congruence with Greek understanding of how people actually experienced rather than simply dreamed a dream. 'Thus, practitioner's dreams about the ancestors are not merely seen as carriers of the ancestors' messages but as actual experience of it and consequently, many dreams do not require interpretation but are acted upon directly' (Mfusi 1984: 18). As in psychoanalysis, dream interpretation is a significant part of the practice of any Zulu *isangoma* and, interestingly Mfusi (1984: 74) says that the interpretations given by these diviners are 'reliably consistent'.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps then, in terms of the psychology of dreaming and dream analysis, the ideas of the *isangoma* should not be discounted.

I should now like to begin investigating oracular divination, a form that was exclusively used in the ancient world, although I intend to dispute this perception to some extent. Although the modern English word 'oracle' is derived from the Latin, the Greeks naturally had several terms of their own for the concept. Two of the most important were *μαντεῖον* and *χρηστήριον*, both of which indicate the place at which oracles are given as well as the actual oracular responses themselves. This dual meaning shows that both response and sanctuary were inextricably linked in the mind of the ancient Greek, or rather that one could not receive oracular responses anywhere one liked. The oracle

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<sup>14</sup> Mfusi's study essentially entailed providing a 'standardised' dream—one in which the psychological symbolism was firmly established, at least according to western beliefs—to a sampling of Zulu diviners in order to establish how their processes of interpretation worked and to see whether or not there were any commonalities between the interpretations of different diviners.

is something peculiar to the life of the ancient world but which had a place of very high esteem. As Whittaker (1965: 43) explained it, 'oracles occur because man is cursed with knowledge that the future exists and at the same time that he is unable to know and control it.'

Back in the beginning of mythic history the all-knowing Zeus was the patron of prophecy, divination and the oracle. There were in fact several sanctuaries for oracular divination dedicated to the god Zeus in the ancient world. Of particular note is his oracle at Dodona, which was one of the oldest sanctuaries in the ancient world. Despite being the source of all the power of divination, Zeus chose to hand the portfolio of prophecy to his son Apollo (Guirand 1959: 103) who went on to found the pride of all ancient oracular sanctuaries at Delphi. Now the processes behind oracular divination are varied, ranging from possession and trance meditation to interpreting the rustling leaves of the great oak at Dodona. More often than not, someone very human—a priest or priestess—who speaks on behalf of the god represented by the sanctuary, delivers the oracle.

Across the ancient world people established shrines and sanctuaries for the purposes of oracular divination. I have already made mention of two of the most famous sites—Delphi and Dodona—but there were many others, some being more prestigious than the rest. The Egyptian god Ammon had a famous oracle at Thebes, Apollo had other oracles at Didyma and Branchidae, and there were Sibylline prophetesses working at places like Cumae and Ephesus who also gave oracles. Now all of these are the names of specific sites, sanctuaries at which a particular god was worshipped (Apollo in the case of somewhere like Delphi) and also provided prophecy for an established price. It

is therefore strange to find that Evans-Pritchard (1950) exports the term 'oracle' to his descriptions of the mechanisms of divination employed by the Azande.<sup>15</sup> I have suggested that the ancient Greek words for 'oracle' is used to delineate two of the facets of oracular divination, since in one context the word can mean the place at which the divining occurs, and in another it can be the result or answer obtained in the divination session itself. As I already noted, the word 'oracle' is from the Latin, ultimately stemming from the word *orāre*, which means to request or ask for something. It is especially relevant in this context as a supplication before, or request made of the gods (Lewis & Short 1969: 1280, s. v. *orāre*). In the context of what went on at an oracular sanctuary, this makes good sense as one usually visited an oracle to ask for something, most often information, divine sanction or just to know that one had made the right decision. With Evans-Pritchard and the Azande however, only one of the two possible meanings of 'oracle' can be seen to be appropriate, namely the notion that an oracle is an answer to some question posed in divination, or in the context that I just explained, it is also a request to be made by the supplicant. This is because the majority of divinations in the Azande culture take place away from the village and other people in general, to avoid any spiritual contamination of the attempt rendering it useless. They do not however perform these divining sessions at certain specified and *sacred* sites, like the temple precincts of the ancient world. In the peculiar case of the rubbing-board oracle, the owner of the rubbing-board can carry it with him everywhere and uses it to divine whenever the need should arise (Evans-Pritchard 1950: 372).

So because the Azande do not utilize 'holy ground' as it were for their oracular divination, can it be seen as similar to that practiced in ancient Greece? Evans-Pritchard

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<sup>15</sup> See Evans-Pritchard's (1950) discussions of the poison oracle, rubbing-board oracle, termite oracle, etc.



(1950: 320) believed that an Azande oracle is 'not much more difficult to understand than the Delphic Oracle. But they [the Azande] do not personify it.' What Evans-Pritchard means by referring to the personification of Greek oracles is that in all of the Greek sites of oracular divination that I have mentioned, a human being delivers and/or interprets the oracle, whether she is possessed by the god or speaking on his or her behalf. Now this is not true of the Azande's so-called oracles whereby some usually inanimate object (except in the case of the poison oracle which employs a live chicken) is asked a question and then 'answers' either yes or no, depending upon a set of previously established conditions and behaviours. The Azande explain their use of inanimate objects for oracular divination by saying that the 'soul'<sup>16</sup> of the object allows it to offer predictions (Evans-Pritchard 1950: 320). This calls to mind the much later notion of *συμπόθεια*, especially since the Azande also believe that there exists a good deal of 'connectedness' between all things in our universe. Technically then, the Azande 'oracles' are little more than varied forms of divination like the reading of omens, and not actual *oracular divination*. To my mind the Zulu however, *do* have oracular divination in the truest sense of the word. This is seen especially in the highest form of divination exhibited among the Zulu, 'that of the 'whistling great ancestors' (*abalozi, amakhosi amakhulu*)' (Ngubane 1977: 103). There are several 'grades' of diviner or techniques that an *isangoma* may employ in Zulu society, ranging from the often scorned 'thumb' diviner, to the bone thrower, 'head' diviner and 'whistling' diviner. Once a person becomes a fully-fledged diviner in the service of a certain community, she moves into a hut that is built away from all the others. It is called *eyamadlozi*, 'that of the shades' (Berglund 1976: 174), and nobody can enter it unless they have business with the diviner or the diviner is present, since the place is

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<sup>16</sup> In the Azande belief structure, everything and everyone is presumed to have what they call a 'soul' that provides the link between all things and a mystical energy 'beyond'.

permanently inhabited by the shades and therefore a *sacred* site. Within the diviner's hut, and indeed within all huts, there is a special area called *umsamo*, a raised and bordered space opposite the doorway where the shades are most especially thought to reside, a Holy of Holies to use a Judeo-Christian concept. More importantly it is where the diviner stores her tools of the trade and other sacred vessels (Berglund 1976: 102). Therefore, to my mind, the diviner's hut must function as a sanctuary, with every Zulu town and settlement having its own 'oracular sanctuary' in that each had a special hut set aside in which the diviner could practice her art. On occasion a diviner might choose to live outside of the community in some secluded place, but even in this case, the hut is still *eyamadlozi* and is therefore still an oracular shrine.<sup>17</sup> The traditional Zulu diviner could therefore be seen to conform with the basic requirements for defining an oracle true to the etymology of the word.

In an essay for the 'Art and Oracle: Spirit Voices of Africa' exhibit at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, Pemberton (2000: 12) suggests that one can separate out several forms of divination—"intuitive divination", in which the diviner spontaneously "sees" or "knows" reality or the future [this is the form of divination displayed by the Oracle in the *Matrix* extract that opened this chapter]; "possession divination", in which spiritual beings are said to communicate through intermediary agents, and "wisdom divination", in which the diviner decodes seemingly random patterns found in nature.' Platonic *μανία* (*Phaed.* 265b) is divided into four classes of its own, of which only

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<sup>17</sup> Whittaker (1965: 36f) describes the Mwari (or Mlimo) oracle that once existed in southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and believes that it was very close to the Delphic oracle in both national importance and religious meaning. The oracle first existed at the political centre of the Rozwi kingdom, but when that disintegrated, it was moved to a cave near Njelele where it remained. It seems that the religious organization of the oracle itself was something akin to that of Delphi with its priests and Delphian nobles. Here he means that the people who dwelt at the oracle, as at Delphi, mediated the activities of any outsider at the sanctuary, as is detailed by Parke and Wormell (1956: 30-34). They would make sacrifices for the foreigners and essentially act as their representatives in various ceremonies.

μανία brought on by Apollo for prophetic purposes seems appropriate. However, his second category of Dionysiac madness might also be related, since Dionysus also often inspired prophecy. Of the four classes of Zulu diviner,<sup>18</sup> two can be put under Pemberton's rather loose definition of 'possession divination' as they involve the ancestor shades, even though the *abemilozi* diviners only speak with the shades and are not actually possessed by them, whereas the 'head' diviner can sometimes be possessed by the shades for a time. A brief comment on the phenomenon of possession in the Zulu culture is necessary before continuing. The diviner is most often possessed by a spirit from within her own family lineage. This spirit is said to 'ride' on the shoulders of the diviner and speak with her, imparting information (Ngubane 1977: 142). The Zulu also believe that one can become possessed by evil spirits. *Indiki* possession is one such example, discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ngubane (1977: 142) believes it to be a result of industrialization, which has seen many Zulu men leave home to work in towns and on the mines. The man dies and because his family are not informed of his passing, they do not perform the necessary rites laying his spirit to rest. The spirit takes possession of someone, causing that person to become 'deranged' and often, enabling them to speak in a different dialect, presumably that of the deceased (Ngubane 1977: 143). The 'thumb' diviner, although often said to be a fraud, can be seen to have some sort of intuition in terms of the questions that she asks her patients, whilst in my opinion, the bone-throwing diviner stands outside of Pemberton's three suggested categories, despite the fact that an argument could be made for the reading of the patterns in the thrown bones as being an example of 'wisdom divination'. The bones do not exactly create a 'pattern found in nature' (Pemberton 2000: 12).

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<sup>18</sup> Fernandez (1967: 11 n. 1) adheres to the standard by noting that among the Zulu there are those that divine by device and those that divine by 'intuition'.



Using Pemberton's categories, I would now like to address two of the four classes of Zulu *isangoma* as they can be placed within the context of oracular divination. I will investigate the 'thumb diviners' and those who employ sticks or bones for their readings later on. For now, the *izinyanga ezadhla impepo* ('diviners who ate *impepo*')<sup>19</sup> and the *abemilozi* (diviners who make use of familiar spirits) are the ones that can unmistakably be connected to oracular divination (Callaway 1872: 177). The diviner who eats *impepo* does so prior to beginning a divining session. This is supposed to allow for greater clarity in the visions that she experiences. In this class of diviner the inquirers gain their answers through the visions that the *isangoma* sees (which are granted by her ancestral shades) and then interprets for them. This is quite similar to the belief that the Pythia at Delphi consumed laurel leaves to give her visions, a belief that I will address with my discussion of oracular divination. The diviner with familiar spirits, sometimes called the 'whistling diviner', is by far the closest of the Zulu diviners to the ancestral shades. This is because the shades communicate directly with her by making a peculiar whistling sound through the thatch of her hut's roof (Callaway 1870: 348). There is a lesser form of this type of divination in which the *isangoma* is thought to hear voices—probably those of the shades—that impart knowledge or answers to questions. However the theatrically inclined individual can quite clearly fake this entirely. As is the case with most forms of divination practiced by the Zulu, the petitioner must indicate his assent or dissent to the suggestions made by the *isangoma*, either vocally with the traditional responses of *yizwa* (hear) and *siyavuma* (true), or by striking the ground with either their fists or sticks (Callaway 1870: 284). So in terms of divining by familiar spirits and *impepo*, the *isangoma* acts not only as a conduit for the message of the shades, but also as a sort of translator, making sense of their whistling

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<sup>19</sup> *Impepo* is a herb that has a place in Zulu magical lore much like that once held by the laurel leaf in Greece, particularly in its position as the stimulant taken by the Delphic Pythia prior to ascending the tripod to speak her oracles.

and visions and putting it into a form that patients and inquirers can comprehend. Therefore the *isangoma* in this case is quite similar to a combination of priests and Pythia at Delphi, who translated and obtained the messages of Apollo respectively. It is, as I said originally, 'the spirits cannot divine by themselves' (Callaway 1872: 181). Several differences are also made apparent in the juxtaposition of the *abemilozi* and the Pythian prophetess. Most important is the difference in origin of their mantic prowess. Apollo, the patron of the Delphic oracle, inspired the Pythia whereas the 'whistling diviner' speaks with the ancestor shades for her inspiration. In my opinion this marks it as a necromantic operation, and the Delphic oracle was not a *nekuomanteion*, an oracle of the dead. By all accounts, most petitioners at Delphi never even saw the Pythia, let alone spoke with her, having instead to relay their request to her through the Delphic priests. And what is more, unlike the clients of the *isangoma*, they could not offer comment on what the Pythia said or predicted. These aspects of the functioning of the Delphic oracle will be further elucidated in the following section discussing oracular divining.

I began this section by offering examples of the many shrines and temples dedicated to oracular divination across the ancient world. Parke (1988: vii) tells us that two types of oracle existed in the ancient world—'those that provided answers to specific questions put by individual enquirers... and those that offered discursive forecasts, in response to no particular question.' The latter sort is represented by the so-called Sibylline prophecies, whilst the former is characterised by places like Delphi. The Zulu diviners are almost exclusively of the first sort, with no examples of Sibylline-like prophecy bar in special circumstances like the reputed deathbed utterances of King Shaka, which do not qualify as oracular in any case. Although Apollo in large part was the patron god of

most oracular sanctuaries, most shrines had established their own way of doing things. Apollo (or rather his clergy) never set down a particular procedure to govern the practice of divination at oracles, and so each followed its own rules and regulations concerning petitioners, purifications, offerings and the like.<sup>20</sup> What this of course meant was that across the Hellenic world there existed a plethora of sometimes similar, sometimes quite extraordinary ways of approaching the god for his advice and counsel. This is quite unlike Zulu practices in which, despite their being no standardizing religious text or something of that nature, all forms of divination follow rituals that have remained very much the same throughout their history. An explanation of this is probably to be found in the apprenticeship system through which all diviners are trained by older and more experienced diviners, and so it maintains a sort of homogeneity in the way in which divination is practiced. Because of this I think it best to investigate the Apolline sanctuary at Delphi as the paragon of centres for oracular divination in the Greek world, rather than become bogged down in the minute differences between the various oracles. As Plutarch (*Mor.* 414 a [Babbitt]), a man who served as a priest at the sanctuary, wrote, Delphi was 'the most ancient in time and the most famous in repute'<sup>21</sup> of all oracles.

The story of the Delphic oracle begins in myth with the Hesiodic *Hymn to Pythian Apollo*, which details some of the history of Pytho, the place where the oracle was to be founded. According to Hesiod there was originally a great dragon called the Python that inhabited the region. Apollo came to the place and destroyed the dragon, establishing his oracle of Delphi. Other histories tell us that the place went through several phases of

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<sup>20</sup> At the oracle at Delphi for example, Delphians were always the first to be allowed to consult the oracle, and the people of Delphi even offered the sacrifices required by other visitors (Sourvinou-Inwood 2000: 15).

<sup>21</sup> καὶ γὰρ τοῦτο δὴ τοῦνταῦθα πρεσβύτατον ὃν χρόνῳ τε καὶ δόξῃ κλεινότατον...



completely peaceful ownership long before Apollo came on the scene. In this case, Pytho is said to have originally belonged to the goddess of the earth, Ge or Gaia, who passed the place on to Themis, the goddess who personified the Divine Law. The fact that Ge or the earth first controlled the Delphic oracle, provides an interesting link to my earlier discussion of the Gates of Dreams, for it appears that like dreams, the prophetic power of this particular sanctuary also has its roots within the earth itself. Control of the oracular sanctuary then went to Phoibe, who finally gave it to her son, Apollo (Aesch. *Eum.* 1-8). Furthermore it has been suggested by Parke & Wormell (1956: 378) that Apollo and Themis could have founded the oracle 'with a moral and civilizing purpose'. It seems that in this case, the Delphic oracle may have begun its life as a means of rebuking and directing the behaviour of mortals. Some versions even connect Poseidon, the sea god, with Delphi in its early history.<sup>22</sup> Parke and Wormell (1956: 20) also point out that in a passage from Diodorus Siculus it is suggested that Delphi was originally found by a flock of goats and their herders who stumbled upon the intoxicating vaporous emissions of a cleft in the ground near Pytho that had a trancelike effect on them.

The oracle at Delphi was a great and majestic centre of religious activity for many hundreds of years. There were naturally many structures and temples associated with the oracle that were constructed on the slopes of Mount Parnassus. Some are in fact even documented mythologically as the three buildings of 'bay wood, beeswax and feathers, and bronze' (Fontenrose 1981: 4). Archaeological digs on the site have however revealed the remains of the original buildings, stone structures that were built, destroyed and rebuilt over three centuries (Fontenrose 1981: 5). Now we wade into the

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<sup>22</sup> This is verifiable through archaeological means because of the existence of an inscription indicating the presence of a precinct of Poseidon at some stage (Dempsey 1918: 25, 27).

murky waters of an argument that has gone on since the late nineteenth century and ask the question, what exactly happened to cause the Pythia to become entranced and ἐνθεος?<sup>23</sup>

I should like to go back a little and discuss the preparations that the Pythian prophetess made before ascending the tripod to prophesy. Parke and Wormell (1956: 30-31) extrapolate a possible procedure: the Pythia would first cleanse herself in the waters of the Castalian stream and then be purified before the great hearth with a concoction containing laurel leaves and barley meal. Meanwhile, the Delphic priests would take a goat and sprinkle it with water to find out whether or not the day was auspicious for prophecy. The goat had to shiver to indicate that the day was an auspicious one for the taking of omens and prophecy. Only then would the Pythia mount the tripod.<sup>24</sup> Several theories have been suggested in the past to explain why the Pythia became and acted as if possessed. Parke and Wormell (1956: 26) wrote that a case was made for the chewing of laurel leaves 'to bring a person into touch with the gods'. Even though ancient authors when describing Delphic operational procedures mention the laurel leaves,<sup>25</sup> it is generally believed that the laurel leaf cannot possibly provide the intoxicating effect needed to create the altered state of consciousness reportedly experienced by the Pythia. Strabo, Plutarch and others reported on an alternative phenomenon to the laurel leaf scenario. They all claimed that some sort of πνεῦμα or gaseous emission was responsible for driving the Pythian prophetess into her μανία (Hale *et al* 2003: 1), and

<sup>23</sup> The Hale *et al* (2003) paper marshals the latest geological findings and experiments to finally provide what seems to be proof of something that the ancients never had any doubt of.

<sup>24</sup> Du Toit (1959: 186) writes that a similar situation exists in Zulu sacrificial traditions, in which a live sacrifice must 'groan or bellow loudly' for it to be acceptable to the ancestors. Many have in fact suggested that it is offensive to the shades if the sacrificial victim does not make a good deal of noise (Berglund 1976: 229).

<sup>25</sup> There is some speculation that the laurel leaf in question is the plant *prunus laurocerasus*, which does in fact contain some prussic acid, but this is not enough to have made the Pythia appear possessed (Whittaker 1965: 23).

that this gas erupted from a fissure below the tripod upon which the Pythia was seated. It should be emphasized that 'no writer earlier than the third century B. C. who has much to say about Delphi—Aeschylus, Euripides, Pindar, Herodotos, all of whom were well acquainted with Delphi—makes any mention of chasm or gases or even *pneumata*' (Fontenrose 1981: 202). Thus reaction to the πνεῦμα suggestion has been varied over the years of archaeological study at Delphi. Initially πνεῦμα was perceived as the most logical (and therefore least magical) means of explaining what had happened to the Pythia. Early experimentation at the site however resulted in disproving the πνεῦμα idea as no gases could be detected and no openings could be found through which the πνεῦμα could have escaped. In 1904, Oppé's article 'The Chasm at Delphi' was published, tearing apart every theory on the Delphic Pythia's μανία to date and firmly dismissed the πνεῦμα suggestion. Later work relegated the idea of a gas being responsible for the Pythia's inspiration to a place in the mythic history of the region along with Apollo and the dragon.

Hale *et al* (2003: 2-4) revisited the πνεῦμα theory with modern geological and chemical techniques. They have noted that the site of the Delphic oracle rests upon two earthquake fault lines, necessitating a more or less constant amount of tectonic activity. These faults in fact intersect on the actual site of the oracle (Hale *et al* 2003: 2) and it also appears that this is true of other Apolline temples in the ancient world, with places like Claros and Didyma also showing an amount of tectonic action (Hale *et al* 2003: 3). At Delphi the action of the intersecting fault lines produces a fascinating reaction. According to Hale *et al* (2003: 3) the faults grind continuously against and in turn, heat up areas of bituminous limestone, creating a chemical reaction that is responsible for the emission of gaseous ethylene which seems to have been the cause of the Pythia'



trances. To explain, Spiller (Hale *et al* 2003: 3) discovered through the research of Isabella Herb that ethylene has an anaesthetic effect, reducing people to complete unconsciousness or inducing altered states of consciousness-specifically, 'the patient remained conscious, was able to sit up and to respond to questions, experienced out-of-body feelings and euphoria, and had amnesia after being taken off the gas' (Hale *et al* 2003: 3). There is also evidence of violent reactions to the gas that support Plutarch's (*Mor.* 438b) report of a Pythia who went mad and eventually died after being forced to prophesy. Aside from this exceptional case, no author reports an actual prophetic frenzy on the part of the Pythia. A passage from Euripides (*Ion.* 91-3 [Parmentier & Gregoire]) bears quoting here:

She sits on the hallowed tripod  
The Delphian woman singing to Hellas her loud cries  
From Apollo.

θάσσει δὲ γυνὴ τρίποδα ζάθεον  
Δελφίς ἀείδουσ' Ἑλλήσι βοάς  
ἄς ἄν Απόλλων κελδήσῃ.

Fontenrose (1981: 206-7) records two variant translations from this text, one speaking of the Delphian woman's 'wild cries' and the other of her 'frenzied utterances'. The word in contention here is βοάς, which in normal circumstances is translated as uttering some form of cry or to shout out aloud. Therefore it seems sensible to render the translation as Fontenrose does himself, saying that the Pythia shouted or called out the prophecies that she was sent by Apollo. This also makes sense logically, since we are told that the Pythia had to call her prophecies to the entourage of priests that waited to convey her words to the supplicant beyond the *adyton*. The earlier translators appear to have allowed imagination to get the better of them with their notion of a Pythia who became frenzied when possessed by Apollo. Frenzied possession and trance were after all truly the province of Dionysus, with Apollo always portrayed as more controlled and

logical. Thus it would appear that there is no real religious or magical reason for the Delphic Pythia's trances, but rather the careful planning and placement of temple builders and a chemical reaction explain them. It is interesting to note that this ἔνθεος state is present in the Zulu *isangoma* as well, since it is believed that the diviner who communicates with the ancestor shades will always hear them whispering, telling them that they (the diviners) 'will not speak with the people; they will be told by us [the shades—the diviner was not the one who communicated with the client] everything they come to enquire about' (Callaway 1870: 265). Prophetic frenzy is not a part of Zulu divination either. Of the two main categories of Zulu *isangoma* that can be thought of as inspired diviners, the 'whistling' diviner and the diviner that eats *impepo* to aid in the experiencing of visions, neither is actually possessed and turned ecstatic. The closest that the 'whistling' diviner in fact comes is with their special gift that allows them to understand and translate the whistling made by the ancestor shades. The rare case of the so-called 'head' diviner is perhaps a true ecstatic that actually becomes possessed by a shade or shades. However, the 'head' diviner is still nothing akin to the frenzied maenadic prophetess of Dionysiac fame or the wildly shouting Pythia described earlier.

To actually consult the Delphic oracle was also an interesting proposition. First of all, the main oracle—the Pythia herself—was not open for business all year round. There were particular times of the year and then, only certain days that were declared auspicious, that the Pythia could mount the tripod on. Parke and Wormell (1956: 30) wrote that consultations were in fact limited to around the seventh day of every month, with the exception of the winter months. There was furthermore an established order in which the oracle was consulted that governed who would approach and when. Non-

Delphians also had their activities at the sanctuary mediated by the inhabitants of Delphi who would offer sacrifices on their behalf. This basic rule of 'Delphi first', set the tone for the rest of the regulations governing consultations. Greeks were always before the barbarians, and then there was a particular order amongst the Greeks themselves. Delphians naturally came first, then any members of the Delphic Amphictiony, and then the rest of Greece. Additionally, some people, cities or states were given a special 'award' by the Delphians called προμαντεία which entitled them to approach the Pythia first in their category (Sourvinou-Inwood 2000: 15). For example, the award might allow for some state to have their consultation first of all those in the Delphic Amphictiony, but still after the Delphians themselves. After all of these categories had come into play, the final organizing of petitioners was on a first-come-first-served basis. Additionally, one had to have paid the requisite fee—a special cake that was offered to the god. Needless to say the cake was quite expensive. One had to furthermore offer a sheep or goat at the inner hearth (Parke and Wormell 1956: 32).<sup>26</sup> What this all meant was that the cost of a consultation with the Delphic Pythia herself was somewhat prohibitive and, although the Delphic oracle was often touted as a place where anyone could come to learn their fate, the average labourer probably had neither the time nor the money to spend on questioning the Pythia. The situation seems to have been similar among Zulu diviners as well. In order to attract the attention of the shades, an animal sacrifice was often required, with cattle and livestock being an extremely valuable commodity. Therefore people would only consult those diviners who work in especially close contact with the shades (e.g. the 'whistling' diviner) should the

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<sup>26</sup> The rigmarole of procedures through which a petitioner went prior to consulting the oracle allowed the priests at the Delphic sanctuary a fair amount of time in which to assemble any necessary information pertaining to the request. Perhaps this is a contributing factor in the accuracy of many of the Pythia's predictions (Whittaker 1965: 28).



situation become serious. Until then they would probably use diviners that were cheaper and lower down on the scale of importance.

Who then would approach the Delphic oracle for a consultation and why? I have already stated the answer to this quite broadly, namely that both individuals and city-states were allowed to make enquiries of the Pythia. Because of the various charges, only those with sufficient means could organize a consultation, meaning that the majority of petitioners were kings, nobles, wealthy merchants, generals and the like. It is interesting to note here that there appears to have been other less grand and less expensive methods of divining available at Delphi. Now although the Pythia's responses were seen as the highest that any petitioner could receive (since she did speak directly for the god Apollo), the others, namely praying to Delphus and Parnassus the eponymous heroes, and the much-disputed casting of lots, could provide answers or guidance for people with 'smaller' problems. The notion of a system of divination by lots or by the two beans as it is sometimes referred to, is based largely upon etymological arguments, with the word ἀναρπῆν, to pick up, being used in some ancient sources to describe responses obtained from Delphic divinations. Many have taken the word to therefore infer the picking up of stones used in the casting of lots, and thus they suggest that lots were used at Delphi (Dempsey 1918: 51), although this cannot be proven conclusively.

Returning now to the petitioners and their petitions, I would like to draw attention to one of the most famous tales of the success of the Delphic oracle at making predictions. As I have already noted in my introduction, the tale of King Croesus of Lydia is related by Herodotus (1. 46-49) who tells of how Croesus tested all of the most renowned

oracles in the Greek world. He sent messengers to each oracle to ask them at an appointed time what it was that he was doing. Supposedly only the oracle at Delphi was able to correctly state what the king was doing, and so it earned his praise and contributions. King Croesus then proceeded to ask the Delphic oracle his real question – whether or not he should make war on the Persians. Thanks to an ambiguous response from the Pythia, which told him that if he went to war he would destroy a great empire; he went to war and was utterly defeated. Parke (1985: 15) however suggests that this story is exactly that, a fiction ‘concocted to glorify the Pythian Apollo over his prophetic rivals and to explain the rather embarrassing presence of the vast dedications from Croesus.’ Dempsey (1918: 83) however says that the Delphic priesthood had no penchant for ‘self-aggrandisement’, an opinion that appears to be countered by another story related to the oracle. I refer to the tale of Oedipus, who despite his best efforts to prevent fulfilling the prophetic pronouncements of the Delphic Pythia, still famously ended up killing his father and marrying his mother. According to Fontenrose (1981: 96), neither the Euripidean nor Sophoclean versions of this myth mention that there was an oracular prediction from Delphi to warn of what came to pass. It seems that many times in the history of the telling of this story, Delphi was not even mentioned (Fontenrose 1981: 98). What is more interesting is that something similar seems to have occurred with the tale of Orestes, with his visit to the Delphic oracle possibly a Delphic fabrication that priests and adherents employed to portray their<sup>27</sup> conception of Apollo as most correct and most deserving of accolades (Fontenrose 1981: 109). Greek involvement in the Persian War led to many problems for the Delphic oracle and its prestige suffered. The oracle failed to predict that the Greeks would eventually defeat

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<sup>27</sup> From my two examples it can be seen that there were many different Apollos taking a hand in the affairs of men. This is of course untrue. What these comments do show is that while many of the oracular sanctuaries claimed Apollo as patron and provider of wisdom, they could all still vie for the title of best or most accurate oracle in terms of how their influence was received in the human world.

the Persian army, and even on some occasions recommended surrender, and this badly tarnished the reputation of the Delphic oracle, where once the sanctuary had even received city-state constitutions for approval, it became more and more neglected (Burkert 1985: 116) until it was almost completely ignored in the days of Cicero (*De Div.* 2. 41. 87).

On the other side of the coin we have the completely unflattering tale of the biography of Aesop, the fabulist. We have not received any information about him from his contemporaries of the sixth century B. C., and so rely on later sources like Herodotus (2. 134), who makes mention of the fact that Aesop was a slave and was killed in Delphi, and Aesop's second century A. D. biographer for the story in its entirety. It seems that Aesop was extremely intelligent but 'of loathsome aspect' and unable to carry out any sort of labour due to serious deformities (*Life of Aesop*, tr. Hansen 1998: 111). He began as a slave but was later able to win his freedom, due primarily to his intellect, and chose to make a tour of the known world (*Life of Aesop*, tr. Hansen 1998: 151). At Delphi he angered the inhabitants by insulting them and declaring them and their city worthless. Frightened that Aesop would leave Delphi and spread his poor opinion of their city around the world, the Delphians hid a sacred cup amongst his possessions and promptly accused him of stealing from the sanctuary. Aesop was then put to death (*Life of Aesop*, tr. Hansen 1998: 162). Later, a plague befell the city of Delphi and the Pythia decreed that it was a result of what they had done to Aesop. Only by propitiating his restless spirit could they rid themselves of the pestilence (Fontenrose 1981: 304).<sup>28</sup> Even if this tale of a plot against Aesop that ended in his death was a complete fabrication, it is still indicative of general trend of thought regarding Delphi. It

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<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that Fontenrose does not believe this oracle to have been real.



would appear that Delphi had a habit of jealously guarding its place atop the religious ziggurat, so much so that it could have been suggested that Delphians were responsible for the execution of Aesop. In addition to this story, Fontenrose's (1981: 309) catalogue of oracular responses indicates that the Pythia could be 'bought' on occasion to carry out the wishes of a special petitioner. Fontenrose reports that in about 510 B. C. Kleisthenes was able to convince the Pythia to tell any Spartan who came to consult the oracle to 'Free Athens' as at the time the city was under the control of the Peisistratids.

Delphi did have some redeeming virtues however. Parke and Wormell (1956: 49) state that almost every city that chose to send out citizens to found new cities or colonies would have gone to Delphi for divine counsel and the sanction of the gods. This is because founding a new colony was not only an extremely difficult undertaking, it was also shrouded in religious connotations. Why was this the case? Dempsey (1918: 96-7) believes the situation was similar to the founding of a new temple in that the new colony or city 'was in reality a new sanctuary in which the gods of the mother-city would take up their abode.' The leaders of these colonizing expeditions probably came to the Pythia with their plans already mapped out (Parke and Wormell 1956: 50) hoping for a sort of religious rubber stamp on their operation that would announce to all-comers that they had the favour of the gods. This would perhaps have even drawn in additional colonists for the cause. Burkert (1985: 116) added to this by suggesting that Pythian Apollo was in large part responsible for much of Greece's colonial activity in the west and around the Black Sea because of the role of Delphi in dispatching colonies. Another Apolline oracle at Branchidae in Asia Minor also played an important role in the founding of Greek colonies from as early as the eighth century B. C. Apparently 'some encouragement from Apollo would be a great help to morale in the difficult days

before and immediately after the foundation' of a colony (Parke 1985: 10). Aside from obtaining divine sanction for their plans, there seems to have been a logical explanation for the colonists seeking permission from Delphi. Like a good intelligence-gathering organization, the priests of the oracle 'were in touch with all parts of the known world, Greek and barbarian alike. Envoys came continually to the oracle, and we may feel sure that the Delphic priests did not neglect the excellent opportunity of gaining knowledge which this fact afforded' (Dempsey 1918: 102). This suggestion seems to make logical sense, and it is my belief that the priests were able to assemble more detailed analyses of possible sites for colonization in a way that no other individual or group could because of their place at the centre of the known world.<sup>29</sup>

After highlighting the role of the Delphic oracle in colonization and addressing a few of its more interesting pronouncements, I would like to call attention to one or two more examples of the oracle in operation. For this purpose I have chosen three apparently historical examples and two examples from myth. I begin with Thucydides and his account of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides (1. 24) tells of a situation involving the city of Epidamnus just prior to the commencement of the war. The citizens apparently expelled all of the aristocrats from the city after discovering that they had been colluding with some attacking barbarians. The city appealed to Corcyra for aid but were denied. They then asked the Delphic oracle for advice and were told to send away to Corinth for assistance since the founder of their city had been a Corinthian. This they did and Corinth received the city of Epidamnus as a colony and immediately dispatched

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<sup>29</sup> The ancients often regarded the sacred *omphalos* stone that stood at Delphi as the centre of the world (Eliade 1971: 231-233). It is interesting that some authors like the Roman writer Varro (*Ling. Lat.* 7.17) also believed this stone was the tomb of the Python, slain by Apollo. Eliade's (*ibid*) suggests that these two ideas are in fact one, since the tomb is also a centre, a point of congruence between living, dead and deity. This is yet another indication of the link between prophecy and the earth.

aid (Thuc. 1. 25).<sup>30</sup> Another author, Xenophon (*An.* 6. 1), writes of his involvement in the Persian War. Early on in his history he writes of his decision to become a general in the army. He wrote that all of the captains were in favour of his leadership but that he was uncertain. Apparently, Socrates had told him to consult the Delphic oracle over his proposed trip to see Cyrus, the Persian king, since the Athenians might have used the trip as an accusation against him. The oracle had told Xenophon to make a sacrifice to Zeus, which he saw as a good sign because it linked with an eagle (the sacred bird of Zeus) that he had seen earlier. A diviner had even told him that the bird indicated something great to come. The eagle coinciding with the pronouncement of the Delphic oracle raises another interesting aspect of the belief in the power of divination. Earlier (see pp. 70f) I pointed out that a Zulu would always visit several diviners prior to making an accusation of witchcraft against someone. This belief in confirming a prediction or prophetic utterance through more than one source is something shared between the Greeks and the Zulu. Because the Delphic oracle, and major centres of oracular divination like it, was thought to be the pinnacle of prophecy in the ancient world, they would usually have the last stop on such a trip; with the supplicant having already visited a lesser diviner, *nekuomanteion*, or even simply witnessed some omen himself or herself. The third account is drawn from Herodotus (5. 92) and concerns the city of Corinth, which at the time was ruled by the family of the Bacchiadae. One of their daughters, a woman named Labda, came to marry a man called Eëtion. Having no children, Eëtion went to consult the Delphic oracle, which informed him that his wife was in fact pregnant. The Bacchiadae found out about the Pythia's pronouncements and used it to interpret an older prophecy that had not previously been understood. They realized then that the child of Labda and Eëtion would be trouble for them, and

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<sup>30</sup> This seems little more than an exercise in common sense, as the Delphic priests, perhaps having knowledge of the ancient origins of the city of Epidamnus, could have surmised that Corinth would come to the defence of one of its colonies.



organized ten men to do away with it. They failed, and the child, called Cypselus, grew up to consult the Delphic oracle himself. The Pythia's prophecy in turn motivated him to seize power in Corinth and he became tyrant of the city.

The two mythological tales I wish to present are those of Orestes and Oedipus. I have already mentioned a good deal of the tale of Orestes, and where the Delphic oracle fits in is as follows. Before his father, Agamemnon, returns from the Trojan War, Orestes is sent away from the palace and remains hidden until the Delphic oracle informs him that he must avenge the murder of his father or suffer a terrible fate, for the Furies will hound him until his father's blood is quieted (Aesch. *Cho.* 270-296). He returns home and with the help of his long-suffering sister Electra, kills his mother and her lover in retribution for the murder of Agamemnon. Unfortunately, the Furies attach themselves to Orestes anyway, for spilling the blood of his mother, and he must return to Delphi in search of peace (Aesch *Eum.* 270). The story of Oedipus is well known and the Delphic oracle's warning to his parents, to the effect that he will come to kill his father and marry his mother, begins it. Furthermore, at the start of the play *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus as king of Thebes sends Kreon away to Delphi to find out why a terrible plague has befallen the city. The plague exists because of the unnatural crimes that he himself has unknowingly committed, and the Delphic oracle reports that the murderer of the former king of Thebes must be found and punished to end the plague. This is of course Oedipus, and it leads to a terrible realization once all of the evidence has been assembled. Du Toit (1959: 196) offers a possible parallel in the Zulu context, with the Zulu belief that should a man commit a truly terrible act (like killing your father to marry your mother), the patronage of the ancestors might come to be withdrawn and drought and suffering would follow.

To conclude my comments on the oracle at Delphi, I should give some indication of the level of esteem in which the ancients held the Delphic oracle. Firstly, Plato (*Laws* 738 b) wrote that ‘...no man of sense, —whether he be framing a new State or re-forming an old one that has been corrupted, —will attempt to alter the advice from Delphi or Dodona or Ammon...’ This shows just some of the influence that a place like Delphi must have had in ancient times. Secondly, the Spartans had a custom until about the third century B. C., whereby they would ask the oracle at Delphi (and sometimes Olympia) whether or not their kings should be deposed. As Parke (1988: 84) has it, every eight years the ephors, the ruling council below the kings of Sparta, used to watch the sky on a clear night to see if any falling stars crossed between certain specified areas of the heavens. If this occurred, they immediately deposed their kings on the charge of having offended the gods in some way (the star being a divinely sent sign). Messengers would be dispatched to the oracle where Apollo would have the final say on the guilt or innocence of the kings. Therefore a Spartan king’s rule rested on the sanction of the Delphic Pythia.

Aside from Apollo’s mighty sanctuary at Delphi there were many other ‘true’ and ‘false’ shrines at which one could seek answers. The Sibylline prophetesses are also to be included in this, although they are also an exception of a sort, because as Parke (1988: 6, 7) suggests, the Sibyls experienced ‘apocalyptic visions’, and rather than being asked questions by droves of petitioners, they produced books of prophecies of a more general nature, copies of which were often circulated amongst the populace.<sup>31</sup>

Apollo also inspired the Sibyls, but unlike the Delphic Pythia, they were never actually

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<sup>31</sup> ‘The Sibyl’s oracles, as they were not in answer to particular enquiries, foretold events of general significance involving, not private individuals, but cities and kingdoms: war, famine, pestilence or natural phenomena such as earthquakes, floods, or volcanic eruptions’ (Parke 1988: 10).

*possessed* (literally ἐνθεός) by Apollo. Instead, a Sibyl functioned as a clairvoyant (Parke 1988: 9) using her link with the god of prophecy to formulate visions, rather than having the god speaking *through* her as at Delphi. The fact that the Sibylline prophecies (also called Sibylla)<sup>32</sup> were available in an ordered and written form, naturally made room for some embarrassment when an apparently important event took place that had not been recorded by the Sibyl.<sup>33</sup> The problem of the omission of important events was however one simply remedied—more books of oracles were produced, this time with the important event neatly inserted in some vague prophecy!

Despite how it may appear, Apollo did not have a complete monopoly on oracular divination in the ancient world. I have already made mention of Zeus as the ultimate origin of divination, and of the fact that several sanctuaries like Dodona were dedicated to him as places at which one could receive oracles. According to Fontenrose (1981: 229) the priests at Dodona interpreted signs, traditionally thought to have been given by the rustling of a great oak tree, or else drew lots to divine the will of Zeus, and the priests of Olympia used what is called extispication or haruspication, the investigating of the entrails of sacrificial victims, to make their determinations. Other deities also maintained shrines of oracular divination. Dionysus was the patron of divination through oracular frenzy, an idea largely foreign to Zulu belief,<sup>34</sup> and in fact came to share the sanctuary at Delphi with Apollo, although he never seemed to share in its 'oracular function' (Dempsey 1918: 34). This is because the frenzy (μανία) in which

<sup>32</sup> It is interesting that only two major early authors really make reference to Sibylla, namely Aristophanes in the *Knights*, which 'turns largely on the importance of oracles' (Parke 1988: 103), and Euripides in the little known *Busiris*.

<sup>33</sup> This was a problem never really faced by the Pythian prophetess because most of her hexameters were intended for individuals and typically concerned events of a far smaller scale.

<sup>34</sup> 'Ufufunyane' possession, resulting mainly from witchcraft, can be seen as a form of frenzy in which the person is possessed by a multitude of spirits of different races. Ngubane (1977: 144) describes it as follows: the person 'becomes hysterical and weeps aloud uncontrollably, throws herself on the ground, tears off her clothes, runs in a frenzy, and usually attempts to commit suicide.'



divining took place in the cult of Dionysus was usually something communal that involved dancing and drinking (Dodds 1951: 69). The cult of Dionysus was in fact dramatized in Euripides' *Bacchae*. Finally, a strange and less well-known oracle existed at Delos, dedicated to 'Glaukos and the Nereids'. Glaukos, a sea power, and also called 'the Old Man of the Sea', was thought to have the ability to reveal the future to those whom he chose (Halliday 1913: 141).

The dream and the oracle were the most popular and most widespread methods of divining available to the ancient Greeks. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (lines 484-499) he lists the five primary forms of divination that the titan Prometheus was said to have first given to humanity: dreams, omens, the flight of birds, the entrails of sacrificial victims (haruspication) and the reading of fires (pyromancy). Oracular divination is not included in this list because it stems from gods like Apollo and Zeus themselves, and as such is not really a 'technique' that could have been taught. The study of the behaviour and flight patterns of birds was quite commonplace in the ancient world and is mentioned fairly often in the Homeric epics as a means of divining. Haruspication seems to have been a technique that originated with the neighbours of the Greeks, the Etruscans, and was 'picked up' at some stage as a different approach to the common question of what the future might hold. The practice of omen reading was something that the man-in-the-street could do with a little skill, since as I have already pointed out, even a sneeze could become invested with meaning. Pyromancy does not appear to have been very commonly practiced among the ancients and rests with a number of other rare methods of divination that I shall not discuss. Not spoken of by Aeschylus is the old method of necromancy, which is perhaps older than all other forms of divining, bar the dream itself. Homer in fact provides one of the best sources for

necromantic ritual in his *Odyssey*. In terms of Zulu divining, I have already dealt with the *abemilozi*, or the diviners involved with the ancestor shades. Callaway (1872: 177) provides several other examples of the types of diviners in Zulu society that still need to be addressed: the *izinyanga zesityupa*, or 'thumb' diviners have already had small mention; the *amabukula izinti* and *amabukula amatambo*, or diviners utilizing sticks and bones respectively, are more popular than the 'thumb' diviners, as is evidenced by the vast number of cultures to use the practice of 'throwing the bones' right across Africa; and finally the *izinyanga ezadhla impepo*, or diviners who consume *impepo*, a quasi-magical herb thought to bring the person into a higher communion with the shades.

I shall now discuss the ancient rites of necromancy, which Hopfner (1935: 2218) in *Paulys Realencyclopädie* separates into two schools, one with rituals dedicated to the pacification and remembrance of the spirits of the dead, and the other with rituals used to obtain supernatural knowledge from the deceased. Homer most famously commemorates ancient Greek necromancy in book eleven of the *Odyssey*. This scene, sometimes referred to as the *Nekuia*, is one in which Odysseus meets with the ghosts of many of the ancient mythic heroes and even the spirit of his own departed mother. However, for our purposes, the important aspects of the episode are the ritual that Odysseus conducts to put himself into contact with the dead, and his encounter with the spirit of the famous diviner Teiresias.<sup>35</sup> The ritual begins at a place that Circe specifies for them, probably one of the many cave entrances thought to exist across the ancient world that allowed ingress to the kingdom of Hades or even at one of the more important *nekuomanteia*, the oracles of the dead. Taking the sheep they brought with

<sup>35</sup> According to Stanford (1965: 381), 'a visit to the Land of the Dead is customary for great heroes, and yet according to Homer (*Od.* 11. 13) Odysseus does not actually go down into Hades but instead travels to the farthest reaches of Ocean to perform his ritual.

them, Odysseus begins the ritual with the help of two members of his crew—Perimedes and Eurylochus (Hom. *Od.* 11. 20-33). Odysseus digs a pit and proceeds to make libations to the spirits, libations of milk and honey, and wine and water, followed finally by sprinklings of barley meal.<sup>36</sup> He pours out the blood of the sacrificial sheep and watches as all manner of souls approach, for when a spirit drinks of the blood it gains the use of its mental faculties and is able to speak with the living for a time.<sup>37</sup> Odysseus must fend off these spirits with his sword, until the ghost of Teiresias, still carrying his golden staff as a symbol of his status as a diviner (Hom. *Od.* 11. 91), comes forward. He drinks of the bloody offering and is able to communicate with Odysseus for a time, and imparts information on how Odysseus can set out for Ithaca. According to a story (Willoughby 1928: 18), King Shaka is also believed to have utilised necromancy. It is said that he obtained the sanction of the long dead chiefs of the Zulu tribe for his rule by supposedly using a certain prophet who made an Odysseus-like journey to the underworld and spoke with them on Shaka's behalf. As Halliday (1913: 238) has it, in order to divine through the dead, one must 'make a voyage to some portal of the Lower World, or else possess the magic power to cleave an opening to Hades by their spells.'

The place to which Odysseus goes to perform this necromantic ritual can be referred to as a *nekuomanteion* or 'prophecy-place of the dead'. Another related word, *psuchagōgion*, labels these oracles as 'drawing-places of ghosts' (Ogden 2001: 17). According to Ogden (2001: 17) there were four primary oracles at which the spirits of the dead were called upon to divine—'Acheron in Thesprotia, Avernus in Campania,

<sup>36</sup> πρῶτα μελικρήτω, μετέπειτα δὲ ἡδέϊ οἶνω,  
τὸ τρίτον αὖθ' ὕδατι· ἐπὶ δ' ἄλφειτα λευκὰ πάλυνον. (Hom. *Od.* 11. 27-28. [Allen])

<sup>37</sup> ὃν τινα μὲν κεν ἔῳς νεκρῶν κατατεθνηῶτων  
αἵματος ἄσπον ἔμεν, ὃ δέ τοι νημερτὲς ἐνίψει  
ᾧ δέ κ' ἐπιφθονέοις, ὃ δέ τοι πάλιν εἴσιν ὀπίσω. (Hom. *Od.* 11. 147-149 [Allen])



Heracleia Pontica on the south coast of the Black Sea, or Tainaron at the tip of the Mani peninsula.' In essence, these *nekuomanteia* appear to have been similar to the oracles set up in the name of certain ancient Greek cult heroes like those of Delphus and Parnassus mentioned earlier, for both involved the consultation of the dead. The important difference arises in exactly who was consulted, for at a hero's oracle only the hero could be questioned, whereas at a specific *nekuomanteion* (although the term can be applied loosely to the hero oracle as well) any ghost could be questioned by the petitioner (Ogden 2001: 25) as was the case in *Od.* 11 with Odysseus' visit to Teiresias. It is also interesting that wielders of magic called *ψυχαγωγόι* are thought to have practiced the art of necromancy as early as the time of Aeschylus, who commemorated their practices in the fragmentary play of the same name. As Ogden (2001: 27) noted, most *nekuomanteia* were to be found in out of the way places, dark forests, caves and the like, places that also seem to have a strong connection with earth. Furthermore, all but one of the 'big four' oracles had a large body of water associated with it and one was actually patronised by Poseidon himself (Ogden 2001: 34ff), the god of the sea and also called the Earth-shaker. This again draws out the apparent link that exists between earth and skill in prophecy.

The use of magical ritual to draw upon the knowledge of the deceased or the ancestor shades is one of the oldest means of harnessing the forces of magic. The Haghia Triadha sarcophagus, a fourteenth century B. C. Cretan relic, displays a scene in which the blood of a bull is poured onto the ground as an offering, and a ghostly form takes shape in response (Morrison 1981: 89). Bull's blood is again mentioned by Halliday (1913: 106), noting that at Aigai the priestess would consume the blood and become inspired. It seems that drinking the bull's blood could very well kill someone who had

not maintained the local cult's taboo on sexual activity. Finally, the Argives made a regular monthly sacrifice of a lamb to Apollo, the blood of which was drunk by the priestess who also came to prophesy because of divine inspiration (Halliday 1913: 126). In making their sacrifices the Zulu had a very specific manner in which the portions of the sacrificial animal were divided up among those who took part. The blood of the animal was also divided up among them, and when the meat and blood were taken home after the sacrifice, the meat was not eaten but was left 'at the upper end' of the hut (Callaway 1870: 180), presumably in the *umsamo* with the shades. However, the blood was allowed to be consumed immediately (Callaway 1870: 179-182).

There was also a strong connection between dreams and the dead. Aeschylus writes in the *Persae* of the Queen Mother of the Persians, Atossa, who experiences a dreadful dream one evening (Aes. *Pers.* 176-231). The dream is interpreted by the Chorus, a group of elderly Persians, who then advise Atossa that she should conduct a ritual to communicate with and propitiate the spirits of the dead that must have contacted her through her dream. There was an established continuity between the spirits and the dreams of the living. It was particularly noticeable at the *nekuomanteia*, where the incubation was the most common means of making contact. Atossa sets out to conduct the ritual with the aid of the Chorus. She pours out libations to honour the dead and then exhorts those standing with her to sing the prayers needed to summon her dead husband Darius before them so that she might have his counsel (Aes. *Pers.* 619-622). Following this the Chorus then offers prayers to the earth and all of the deities of the underworld until the ghost of Darius manifests itself before them. In confirmation of Atossa's dream, Darius declares that the Greeks will indeed be the undoing of their son, Xerxes, who is currently on campaign in Greece. In ancient Greek literature this is the only

substantial case of a necromantic rite occurring in the daytime. These rituals were not only confined to the night (Ogden 2001: 166) because, like the Zulu, the Greeks believed that the night was truly the time of the shades, but they were also confined to dark places as well.

To continue with any discussion on with any discussion of the phenomenon of necromancy requires that I first make a brief reiteration of some of the fundamentals described in my earlier chapter on the belief systems of the Greeks and the Zulu. For the ancient Greeks, the shades of their ancestors did not exhibit nearly as much power as the shades that the Zulu propitiated.<sup>38</sup> As the tale of Teiresias illustrates, barring him, 'the shades are without force and without consciousness' (Burkert 1985: 197). It was the Greek collective of heroes whose function was the same as the Zulu ancestor shades and who were able to channel magical energies towards the living. Once the cult of the dead had disintegrated among the ancient Greeks, it was replaced by a propitiation of, and supplication before the so-called heroes, who unlike the deceased of the older belief system, were able to impress their will upon the living with mystical forces. Closer to chthonic deities in concept, they could reach out from the grave, and like the Zulu ancestor shades, bring good or bad fortune to the living. The major difference here can be expressed in terms of 'reach'. Whereas Zulu shades almost always have influence only with their familial relations, the Greek heroes had much larger influence upon the populace as a whole.

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<sup>38</sup> Stanford (1965: 381) noted that book eleven of the *Odyssey* provides the only text that clearly indicates that a cult of the dead existed in Homeric times. The many elements of the ritual that Odysseus uses to communicate with the ghosts of Hades appear to have been survivals from a time in which internment within the earth was the standard, which came to be replaced by the burning pyre of Homer's day.



The arcane practice of necromancy, particularly as related to oracles of the dead and hero oracles, is probably the closest thing that the ancient Greeks had to the Zulu practice of divination by *abemilozi*, or those with familiar spirits.<sup>39</sup> More often than not a diviner who has these familiar spirits will first report hearing strange whistling and will later be able to understand that which is as mere whistling to others, as the speech of the ancestor shades. Callaway (1870: 267) was told that 'it is not only one [shade] that speaks; they are very many; and their voices are not alike; one has his voice, and another his; and the voice of the man into whom they enter is different from theirs.' The *isangoma* to whom these shades attach themselves does not immediately begin to divine but there is first a period of time in which shades and diviner must acquaint themselves with one another (Callaway 1870: 265) in order to foster an understanding of what is involved. Now when a person approaches this sort of *isangoma* for a consultation, they hear nothing but the whistling coming from the roof of the diviner's home, but acknowledge it as a sign of the shades speaking with the *isangoma*. As I have noted earlier, the shades are able to speak for themselves in this form of divination. The shades appear to perform in a manner similar to that of Apollo at most of his oracles, in that they communicate their intentions through the *isangoma* who seems to function almost as a sort of translator, being the only person able to understand her shades in the first place. Callaway (1870: 349) relates the story of a diviner named Umancele, who was famous for divining with *imilozi*.<sup>40</sup> When a group of people come to consult with the diviner, he proves his power and link with the shades by greeting those in attendance by name, even though he has never met them before. Another story tells of a

<sup>39</sup> It is worth mentioning that the Zulu had no word that could be taken as a synonym for the English word 'familiar'. Instead, they used the phrase '*amatongo a hamba nomuntu*' (Callaway 1870: 248 n. 1) or 'the shades that go with the person'.

<sup>40</sup> *Imilozi* are the shades that dwell with a particular *isangoma*, allowing them to divine (Callaway 1870: 348 n. 1). The term *abemilozi*—those with familiar spirits—is related to this word. *Umlozi*, the root, is a Zulu word referring to a certain kind of whistling noise (Callaway 1870: 348 n. 1) and is therefore used to indicate diviners whose shades made the strange whistling noises to communicate.

family whose boy had serious convulsions. They visited a woman named Umakaukazi who divined with her familiar spirits and she was able to divine a cure for them such that the convulsions never returned and the boy was able to grow to manhood (Callaway 1870: 361-374).

Prophesying with the aid of omens provided by analysing the behaviour and flight of birds is a commonplace in ancient Greek divination, something that Halliday (1913: 248) noted as being particularly popular at the beginning (the age of Homer) and the end of the development of Greek religious practice. It is therefore unsurprising to find that the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* contain many examples of seers employing their mantic skills to unravel the behaviour of a certain bird for clues to future events. Three words are important here—οἰωνός, οἰωνοπόλος, and οἰωνοσκοπεῖν. Firstly, an οἰωνός is most often a bird of prey, especially one that is connected in some way with the taking of omens. This is because birds of prey often bear connections with the Greek pantheon of gods, (e.g. the eagle was considered to be a symbol of Zeus) and were therefore thought of as harbingers of the divine will. Thus an example of an οἰωνός is the raven, a bird whose behaviour was followed carefully. The οἰωνοπόλος<sup>41</sup> would have been the person responsible for observing the birds and interpreting their behaviours, the *augur* to use a later Roman term. He or she would have received training in this form of the mantic art, or else have been inspired by Apollo and thus granted the ability to form interpretations in that manner. Finally, the Greek verb that is used in this context is οἰωνοσκοπεῖν, to watch the behaviour of birds for omens. Halliday (1913: 247) believes it is precisely the flight and song of the bird that caused it to be distinguished for the practices of divination in the first place. Indeed, as Harrison (1962: 97) describes

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<sup>41</sup> Other terms for the οἰωνοπόλος include οἰωνιστής and οἰωνοθέτης.

it, the birds of heaven should be observed because they know more of what is to come than humans, because of their closeness to the τέρατα, the signs derived from the heavenly bodies. Furthermore, (Halliday 1913: 250) ‘understanding bird talk is regularly the way in which the seers of the myths obtain their information. Cassandra and Helenos, Melampus, Mopsos, and Teiresias possessed the gift.’ Thus it would appear that the talents of many of the early mythic seers could be accounted for as being those of the οἰωνοπόλος. It is in Aristophanes (*Birds*. 716-719 [Rogers]) that the relative importance of bird augury in ancient Greece is truly shown:

‘We are your Ammon, Delphi, Dodona, Phoebus Apollo.  
For you turn to the birds before going anywhere—  
Before commerce, or buying necessities, or going  
To a man’s wedding—  
Customarily, it is always decided by the prophetic bird.’

ἐσμὲν δ' ὑμῖν Ἄμμων, Δελφοί, Δωδώνη, Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων.  
ἐλθόντες γὰρ πρῶτον ἐπ' ὄρνεις οὕτω πρὸς ἅπαντα τρέπεσθε,  
πρὸς τ' ἐμπορίαν, καὶ πρὸς βιότου κτήσιν, καὶ πρὸς γάμον ἀνδρός.  
ὄρνιν τε νομίζετε πάνθ' ὅσα περ περὶ μαντείας διακρίνει·

Thornton's (1970: 52) study of the *Odyssey* revealed a standardised format regarding the presentation of bird omens in epic drama. There were two essential elements: firstly, the appearance of the bird and its related behaviours had to be recognised as being an omen, and secondly, an οἰωνοπόλος had to be present and able to puzzle out an interpretation of the phenomenon. An additional part of bird omens recorded in epic is that the manifestation of the omen was typically preceded by ‘a wish on the part of someone present and for whom the omen is typically interpreted’ (Thornton 1970: 52). What this means is that someone would usually have completed a prayer to the gods, asking for a certain thing to occur, and the bird omen would have been perceived as the gods either allowing or denying that request. Thornton (1970: 52) also cites four bird omens in the course of the *Odyssey* that I would like to consider briefly. The first involves the seer Halitherses who interprets a sign sent by Zeus in response to a prayer



made by Telemachus (Hom. *Od.* 2. 146-156).<sup>42</sup> A pair of eagles fly down upon the gathered group of people and then begin tearing each other to pieces as they fly off to the right. Halitherses interprets the omen as indicating the imminent return to Ithaca of Odysseus, and the fact that he will destroy the suitors as well. Because the action concludes with the two birds wheeling off to the right, it is believed that Telemachus' prayer will be answered by Zeus, as it was the convention of the time that the right indicated good fortune and the left, bad (Thornton 1970: 54). At *Odyssey*. 15. 160-165, Telemachus voices his wish to find his father, and receives a sign in the form of an eagle with a goose in its talons flying past on his right. Helen, the wife of King Menelaos, steps forward and interprets the omen, saying that it reveals that Odysseus will eventually return home to exact his revenge. *Odyssey* 19. 535-553 is both a dream and a bird omen. Penelope tells a disguised Odysseus of a dream that she experienced in which an eagle swooped down upon twenty geese that were in her keeping. The eagle killed all of the geese before flying off to settle upon the roof. What is more interesting is that the eagle then proceeded to interpret the dream itself, declaring that the whole thing was in fact some sort of visionary experience and not a simple dream. The interpretation is an obvious one, with the geese representing the suitors that Penelope has been forced to 'keep', and the eagle is of course Odysseus, proclaiming that he will have his revenge. The fourth bird omen occurs at *Odyssey* 20. 242-246. The suitors have plotted to do away with Telemachus, when suddenly they bear witness to an eagle carrying a dove in its clutches. The eagle is flying on their left, and Amphinomus, understanding what is meant by the sign, cautions the suitors to rather remain at their feasting and leave Telemachus alone.

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<sup>42</sup> Telemachus prays that his father, Odysseus, will soon return home and rule Ithaca once more.

There is a very interesting bird omen that takes place in Homer's *Iliad* (2. 311-316

[Monro & Allen]):

'There were some young sparrows, helpless children,  
in the top branches, crouching under the leaves,  
eight of them, and their mother, she who bore them, was a ninth.  
Then the serpent ate them as they chirped miserably;  
and the mother flew around wailing for her dear children;  
and she screeched loudly as he coiled himself and took her by the wing.'

ἔνθα δ' ἔσαν στρουθοῖο νεοσσοί, νήπια τέκνα,  
ὅζω ἐπ' ἀκροτάτῳ πετάλοις ὑποπεπτηῶτες,  
ὀκτώ, ἀτὰρ μήτηρ ἐνάτη ἦν ἣ τέκε τέκνα.  
ἔνθ' ὃ γε τοὺς ἐλεεῖν ἀκατήσθιε τετριγῶτας·  
μήτηρ δ' ἀμφοποῦτο ὀδυρομένη φίλα τέκνα·  
τὴν δ' ἐλελιξάμενος πτέρυγος λάβεν ἀμφοιχυῖαν.

The serpent then eats the mother of the eight and is suddenly turned to stone by Zeus himself, who sent the serpent in the first place. It is of course the seer Calchas who is at hand to provide an interpretation of this strange event. He told everyone present that it must have been an indicator of the situation in which the Achaeans found themselves—they would have to spend nine years laying siege to the city of Troy before they would finally capture it in the tenth year. Later on, another bird omen occurs while the Achaeans are being driven back to the sea by a mighty Trojan onslaught, and Agamemnon begs Zeus to save them from defeat. It is then that Zeus sends an eagle carrying a fawn in its claws. The eagle drops the fawn upon an Achaean altar that is dedicated to Zeus in his capacity as a god of Omens, and taking this as a sign, the Achaeans redouble their efforts and begin to fight back (Hom. *Il.* 8. 245-252). At *Iliad* 10. 274-277, Athene is responsible for sending her own bird omen for her favourite, Odysseus, in the form of a night heron according to Hainsworth (1993: 182).<sup>43</sup> In this situation, Odysseus is setting out on a mission with Diomedes when they spot the bird

<sup>43</sup> Although the Greek word ἐρωδιός is used to name several birds with long legs, this bird seems to have been a symbol of Athene's as is evidenced by some examples of Corinthian and Ambracian coinage (Hainsworth 1993: 182).

flying by on their right and perceive it as a good omen. Yet another bird omen takes place at *Iliad* 12. 200. It is interpreted by a Trojan man named Polydamas, who 'is no θεοπρόπος...[an interpreter of omens] but Homeric omens do not seem to demand much in the way of arcane knowledge for their interpretation' (Hainsworth 1993: 341). A final omen worthy of mention is the only one of its kind (Janko 1999: 146) in Homeric epic. It occurs as Aias challenges Hector to single combat (Hom. *Il.* 13. 821-824) and a great eagle sails over the field of battle. Hector laughs at the sign, but others present recognise that it does not bode well for him. This is the only challenge scene in Homeric epic that contains a portent sent by the gods, and this is especially bad for Hector, since Homeric bird omens always come true (Janko 1999: 146).

It seems sensible to consider several other forms of omens that were recognised by the ancient Greeks. This sort of divination, which involves recognizing the importance of peculiar happenings, has been referred to as kledonomanancy, from the Greek word for an omen (Halliday 1913: 229). First and most importantly, 'the acceptance of an omen clinches the matter [that the omen is in reference to] and makes the fatal utterance or the lucky sign irrevocable' (Halliday 1913: 48), or more simply, once the omen has been seen and interpreted, it *becomes* destiny. Halliday (1913: 164) also offers a psychological analysis of the acceptance of omens and portents. For him it is a vicious circle of belief – angst motivates one to seek portents as a form of counsel from the gods, but at the same time, the portent, particularly if it is thought to bode ill, creates anxiety. And what is more, the more important the situation, the more important and definitive the portent is viewed as being (Halliday 1913: 169). It is to Burkert (1985) that we must turn for an overall assessment of the use of portents as a form of divination. He says that 'any occurrence which is not entirely a matter of course and



which cannot be manipulated may become a sign: a sudden sneeze,<sup>44</sup> a stumble, a twitch, a chance encounter or the sound of a name caught in passing; celestial phenomena such as lightning, comets, shooting stars, eclipses of the sun and moon, even a drop of rain' (Burkert 1985: 112). Aristophanes levelled a somewhat farcical criticism at the more ridiculous portents in his *Acharnians* when the character of Dikaiopolis exclaimed:

'But I counsel you not to hold the assembly  
Concerning the Thracians' wages; and I say to you that  
We have a sign from Zeus, for a raindrop struck me.'

ἀλλ' ἀπαγορεύω μὴ ποεῖν ἐκκλησίαν  
τοῖς Θραξὶ περὶ μισθοῦ· λέγω δ' ὑμῖν ὅτι  
διοσημία 'στὶ καὶ ῥανὶς βέβληκέ με. (Aristoph. *Ach.* 169-171 [Rogers])

Burkert (1985: 111) asserts that a 'faith in signs can persist without religious interpretation.' Today we call this superstition, but as Burkert (1985: 111) continues, a religiously founded interpretation forms the basis for the reading of omens and portents in the context of ancient beliefs.<sup>45</sup> To conclude my section on Greek omen reading I will make note of three cases in which omens occurred in Homer's *Iliad*. In Homeric epic the shining of one's suit of armour and weaponry (either before or during a battle) was perceived as being a good omen, whereas the lack of a shine on one's armour was naturally an ill omen (Hainsworth 1993: 223). There are several instances of this idea working in the *Iliad*. At the commencement of book eleven of the *Iliad*, morning dawns and the Achaeans prepare for battle at the command of Agamemnon. At the conclusion of Agamemnon's arming scene he takes up two spears of bronze, the tips of which are

<sup>44</sup> The portentous sneeze and other involuntary motions of the body are dealt with in Chapter 3.

<sup>45</sup> Roman beliefs regarding augury and the taking of omens seem to have undergone far more systematisation than those of the ancient Greeks. Luck (1985: 251) notes that in this system the Romans had divided omens into two types—*oblative* or signs that one casually observed (like a sneeze) and *impetrative*, signs that were actively sought after.

described as shining from him into heaven (Hom. *Il.* 11. 44-45).<sup>46</sup> In concert with this portent, Athene and Hera bring forth thunder as a confirmation (Hom. *Il.* 11. 45-46). On the other side of the field of battle, the Trojans also make their preparations. Hector strides about issuing orders and his armour is said to shine like the very lightning of his father Zeus (Hom. *Il.* 11. 65-69).<sup>47</sup> Finally, at *Il.* 22. 25-29, Achilles is described using the adjective *παμφαίνονθ'* which means gleaming. But his description is more specific than that, for Homer continues, saying that Achilles shines like a star, the Dog Star of the Orion constellation to be precise, because it shines more brightly than the other stars near it, and in this way Achilles can really be singled out of the Achaean host.<sup>48</sup> Additionally Homer believes the Dog Star is an ill omen because it seems to bring sickness to men (Hom. *Il.* 22. 31-32). Thus we have a double omen in which the armour of Achilles flashes brilliantly, indicating good fortune for the warrior himself but evil for those against him who see him as the Dog Star of Orion.

Weather phenomena also seem to have been invested with prophetic power. This is especially true of Zeus, who as the god of thunder and lightning, seems to make use of these awe-inspiring tools as portents and responses when he does not employ his signature eagle. It seems that other gods can also make use of the weather for the purpose of omens as is seen in the earlier passage with Hera and Athene causing thunder in Agamemnon's wake (Hom. *Il.* 11. 45-46). An example of Zeus answering with thunder occurs at *Il.* 15. 377-378, when Nestor prays desperately for Zeus to

<sup>46</sup> ...τῆλε δὲ χαλκὸς ἀπ' αὐτόφιν οὐρανὸν εἶσω  
λάμπ'. [Monro & Allen]

<sup>47</sup> πᾶς δ' ἄρα χαλκῷ  
λάμφ' ὥς τε στεροπὴ πατρὸς Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο. [Monro & Allen]

<sup>48</sup> Τὸν δ' ὁ γέρων Πρίαμος πρῶτος ἶδεν ὀφθαλμοῖσι,  
παμφαίνονθ' ὥς τ' ἀστέρ' ἐπεσσύμενον πεδίοιο,  
ὃς ῥά τ' ὀπώρας εἶσιν, ἀρίζηλοι δέ οἱ ἀνγαῖ  
φαίνονται πολλοῖσι μετ' ἀστράσι νυκτὸς ἀμολγῶ,  
ὃν τε κύν' Ὠρίωνος ἐπὶ κλῆσιν καλέουσι. [Monro & Allen]

protect the Achaean army from complete destruction at the hands of the advancing Trojans. When he concludes his prayer, Zeus causes thunder in response. The thundering of Zeus is also evident in the *Odyssey*. For example, at *Od.* 20. 102-104, Zeus thunders in response to a prayer offered by Odysseus.<sup>49</sup> He immediately perceives this to be a good omen and his spirits are raised by this realisation. This thunderous portent is then coupled with another sign, a verbal presaging of things to come, from one of the serving woman at Odysseus' palace, whom Odysseus happens to hear praying to Zeus. She asks that the suitors finally be removed from the palace and Odysseus takes this serendipitous event to be a confirmation of the thunder that he heard earlier (*Hom. Od.* 20. 120-121).<sup>50</sup> An additional example of Zeus' thunder occurs as a good omen for Odysseus when he strings his great bow in the shooting contest and proves to all that he has at last returned to Ithaca (*Hom. Od.* 21. 404-415).

The reading of omens from the behaviour of birds also takes place in the Zulu culture. Patterns in the weather are of course of primary importance in any society that does not engage in large-scale agricultural practices, and this is no less true of either Greece or of the manner in which the Zulu employed their knowledge of oionomancy (bird augury). Of particular interest was when rainfall might be predicted, and Callaway (1870: 408) has noted two birds that were thought to be indicators of this—the *isingizi* and *ingqungqulu* birds. Firstly, according to Zulu lore, when a large number of the *isingizi* birds are seen to congregate in one place, it is said to portend rain. In a similar manner, when the *ingqungqulu* bird is heard to cry overhead, it is also believed to indicate coming rains. The behaviour of the *ingqungqulu* bird is also watched for other relevant

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<sup>49</sup> Jones (1988: 189) notes that this thunder occurs in a 'cloudless sky' and cannot be taken as anything but a deliberate sign on the part of Zeus.

<sup>50</sup> There is no way that Odysseus could have manipulated what the serving woman said as he passed. Therefore, her utterance can be accepted as a portentous one linked with Zeus because he is the god to whom she prays.



portents and omens. Should the bird for example, be seen to beat its wings together, this taken as an omen that there is an enemy close by. And should the bird accidentally strike someone with its droppings that person would immediately seek the assistance of either an *inyanga* or *isangoma*, knowing that this occurrence portends some evil on the horizon for him or her. Finally the young boys responsible for herding cattle use a small bird called *isipungumangati* in order to divine the location of any missing cattle. They essentially take note of the direction in which the bird points its head most steadily and then set out to look for the cattle in that direction. Older men make use of the mantis (an insect) in a similar manner (Callaway 1870: 339). Generally, the bird omens of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that I have already drawn attention to, tend to be far more dramatic in their meaning, indicating one's fortune in life and death matters. This is probably the fault of poetic licence in the telling of a really good story. Podlecki (1967: 12) explains in the context of readers and characters in the *Odyssey*:

‘These omens are in one sense more significant for us, the readers, who know the divine plan for Odysseus’ return, than they are for the characters, who have to take them as signs of hope for the future. But we are asked to suspend our superior knowledge in the press of the action, so that for us, too, these occurrences are truly ominous, pointing to the future, but shrouded in mystery and with their full significance hidden from view.’

It appears that in the real circumstances of everyday life omens speak to far lesser events and the smaller but still significant points of one's future.

Certain important omens occur in connection with the religious practices of the Zulu, one connected with the calling of an *isangoma* and the other in the making of any sacrifice. In the former case, that of the *isangoma*, there exists an illness that the Zulu call *uthlabo* that is ‘attended with a stabbing pain or stitch in the side’<sup>51</sup> (Callaway 1870: 268, n. 18). It is said to indicate that the *amatongo* are near the person and require

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<sup>51</sup> Callaway (1870: 268, n. 18) believed this disease to be pleurodynia or pleurisy.

it of her that she begin training as a diviner (Callaway 1870: 267). Ritual sacrifice in the propitiation of the ancestor shades is of prime interest among the Zulu. If an animal was to be offered in sacrifice it would usually take place near an area of the cattle enclosure 'where the shades are' (Berglund 1976: 229). An omen indicating the favour of the shades was then obtained from the sacrifice depending on how the sacrificial victim fell to the ground. For example, if it happened to fall upon its right, then good fortune was indicated to those involved. Now there are many different signs that show the nearness of evil in Zulu belief. A particular lizard called *isalukazana*, or the 'little old woman', is just one such omen (Callaway 1870: 217). Furthermore, 'if a bird's droppings fall on a homestead or on people, fowls ascend huts, shade snakes lie on their backs, calves lie down behind the cow during milking, moles appear on the surface of the earth, cocks crow in the evening, etc., one spits to the left or over the left shoulder (Berglund 1976: 334). In a European context this seems very similar to the practice of warding off the 'evil eye' by spitting, crossing oneself or throwing salt over the shoulder, but for the Zulu it acted as a proof, in that spitting proved that one was not responsible in any way for the resident evil (Berglund 1976: 334).

After investigating dreams, oracles and omens, I now turn my attention to the 'institutionalised' forms of divining that existed among the Zulu. The Zulu 'thumb diviners' or *izinyanga zesitupa* of Henry Callaway's (1872: 177) terminology have already received some discussion, particularly their reputation for charlatanry. Their ritual and practice now require some elucidation. The term *izinyanga yokubula* refers to anyone who is able to divine, or as a more direct translation indicates, to doctors of divining (Callaway 1870: 281 n. 39). Callaway and Berglund both attest that this nomenclature was connected with the Zulu word *bula*, which means 'to hit', and this in

turn is linked to a practice that was common among the clients of diviners, particularly those of 'thumb diviners'. The clients of the diviner would take *izibulo* or rods as Callaway had it (really tree branches), and beat them upon the ground to indicate their assent to any proposition made by the diviner. Callaway (*ibid*) also suggested a psychological motivation for this behaviour. Not only does the strident thumping of the branches indicate to the *isangoma* that he or she is 'following the right clue' (we would probably call it a kind of 'cold reading' technique today) but it possibly put the clients into an excitable mood and would 'keep them off their guard' so that they might forgive a slight error on the part of the diviner more easily. Additionally, 'it is also quite possible that it may also produce an exalted [ecstatic] or mesmeric condition of mind in the diviner' (Callaway 1870: 281, n. 39) and thereby facilitate a communion and sharing of knowledge with the ancestor shades. Of course enquirers with this sort of diviner make an effort to provide as little information as possible prior to the divining session so as to prevent cheating on the part of the diviner (Callaway 1870: 301). Callaway (1870: 301) also provided a description of the events at the commencement of a divining session with an *inyanga zesitupa*:

'...[The diviner] pours some snuff into his hand, and takes it there in the house; he shudders and yawns [usual behaviours indicating the diviner is close to the shades], and then goes out of doors to a clump of trees and sends a man to call them [the clients]. The man calls them, and they go to the clump of trees to the diviner. He tells them to pluck rods for beating the ground. They go and pluck the rods, and return and sit down. He takes out his snuffbox, pours snuff into his hand and takes it; and they do the same. Some say "Hear!" [*Yizwa*]. Others say, "True!" [*Siyavuma*]'

What is interesting is that in his discussion of the events occurring in this particular divining session, Callaway (1870: 284) emphasizes the fact that the *isangoma* in question actually pretends to experience an ecstatic state while divining. This is probably because of the high status of ecstatic divination in all societies and because of



the close relationship with the ancestor shades that *abemilozi* can attest to. The masquerade perpetrated by this particular isangoma is therefore an attempt at legitimising his practice within the context of Zulu cultural beliefs. As Fernandez (1967: 12) wrote, 'the confidence Zulu have in their diviners rests on the conviction that they are assisted by the spirits...' The diviner mentioned in the extract therefore seeks to gain this confidence under the pretence of experiencing this communion with the shades. However, despite the fact that this masquerade occurs, divination in any form (but particularly 'thumb' divination) remains '*an active co-operation between the two parties* [my italics]; the one shrewdly probes behind appearances so as not to offend credulity, the other party agrees to the appropriate probes in such a way as to facilitate access to the backstage, the putative reality to be disclosed in dramatic confrontation' (Fernandez 1967: 16). Unless one truly has access to an otherworldly intelligence, divination becomes a process of negotiation for the Zulu, of give and take, of information sparingly supplied by wary but believing clients, with a clever diviner skilled at weeding out more information until the problem has been laid bare and he or she can then establish some sort of appropriate resolution.<sup>52</sup>

Divination through the use of a magical herb (I use the term loosely) called *impepo* (or *impepho*) does not seem to have received scholarly attention. This is probably because divination of this sort was not terribly exciting or impressively bizarre to the European scholars and clerics of the nineteenth century (or to the readers of the adventure novels for that matter!). It was not obviously a fraud as was believed of 'thumb' divining, there

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<sup>52</sup> A related form of divination is that of the stick diviner, something that Callaway (1870: 327 n. 77) calls *amabukula izinti*. In a manner similar to the bone diviner, the sticks that the *isangoma* uses are put on the ground and then blown on after the diviner has chewed medicine (Callaway 1870: 330). Apparently the sticks would leap around to answer 'yes' to a question and would jump onto the place on the body of a sick person that was supposed to be unwell. To answer 'no', the sticks would lie at rest on the ground (Callaway 1870: 331).

was no studying of strange bits of bone, and there were no possessions or séance-type events. Rather the process was often quite similar to participating in an incubation at a sanctuary of Asclepius or *nekuomanteion* in the ancient world. Berglund (1976: 113) emphasized how important everyone thought *impepo* to be in the processes of divination, so much so that a diviner who is unable to perform to standard is said to have not eaten *impepo*. Symbolically *impepo* therefore represents 'true knowledge' and more specifically it is the 'clearness of perception which a diviner possesses' (Callaway 1870: 321). Berglund (1976: 114) records a similar notion saying that *impepo*, which can be burned, smoked, eaten, or even placed under the head in sleep, allows for great clarity of mind in the work of the diviner, allowing dreams to come through more clearly from the ancestors. This is, it seems, ultimately how divination with the aid of *impepo* functions—the *impepo* is used prior to sleep and then thought to induce visions while the person is at rest. Perhaps it could be seen to function in a manner similar to that of the strange vapours that are believed to have caused the ecstasies of the Delphic Pythia.

The *izinyanga zamathambo*, diviners who make use of the bones for their insights, appear to have been the most prevalent type of diviner in Zulu society. Berglund (1976: 150) stated that the vast majority of initiates training to become diviners were trained by diviners of this variety, a situation that necessarily leads to a prevalence of *izinyanga zamathambo*. This all fits with Du Toit's (1959: 98) claim that the bones are the most important form of divination that the Zulu employ. In fact this particular form of divination is very common across the whole of the African continent, as is shown in the many examples of sets of bones and divining dice that were displayed at the 'Art and Oracle' (2000) exhibit of the New York Metropolitan Museum. Many different animals

are used in the creation of a set of diviner's bones, including those of elephants, lions (Callaway 1870: 332), and possibly apes, baboons, porcupines or ant-bears (Berglund 1976: 185). The diviner typically keeps his or her bones in some sort of container, often a cloth bag, so that the light does not disturb the shades and put them off divining when they are really needed. Prior to use the *isangoma* blows medicine upon the bones and then pours them out of the bag, picking the one's that stand out to divine with (Callaway 1870: 333). The diviner must scrutinise everything about how the bones have fallen, the distance between the various bones and even anything strange about the way in which they may be lying (Mutwa 1996: 26). Furthermore, in terms of the abilities assigned to the bones, they 'are believed to detect the presence of spirits around a sick person, resentful ancestor spirits, offended nature spirits, or malevolent spirits which have been sent by a sorcerer against the person. The bones also will hint at how the affliction (of an ill person, or one under a curse) came about' (Mutwa 1996: 26). When he inquired specifically about how the bones were said to function, Berglund (1976: 186) was told that the bones are not the thing that sees or divines. They are rather *izikhombi* or 'pointers', which the *isangoma* can discern thanks to the assistance of the shades.<sup>53</sup>

I conclude my study of the different forms and rituals involved in divination with a look at one of the stranger ways of divining, namely that of the talking head. Now what is peculiar about these specific heads is their tendency to utter prophecies *after* having been removed from the bodies of their owners. This garish idea does not seem to find a place in Zulu lore,<sup>54</sup> but it is interesting nonetheless. A point of comparison that is

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<sup>53</sup> The Shona of Zimbabwe consider the divining 'dice' that they use to be a 'physical embodiment' of the insights gained in divination (Pemberton 2000: 48).

<sup>54</sup> A recent article in the *Mercury* newspaper of 8 May 2002 by Farook Khan, described a group of East Africans who perpetrated a hoax in Durban with a kneeling man poking his head through a hole in a desk



however worthy of mention is the name that the Zulu give to a certain one of their diviners, the *isangoma sekhandu* or 'head diviner' (Ngubane 1977: 102). This *isangoma* was an ecstatic, hearing the voices of the ancestor shades, not in the same way that some diviners hear and understand the whistling sounds made by the shades, but in a manner very similar to that of an ancient Greek ecstatic diviner. This indicates something akin to the Greek belief that one's  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  resided in the head (cf. notion in both Zulu and Greek cultures of a sneeze confirming a statement) and therefore offers a plausible suggestion of the existence of a belief in the mantic power of heads.

According to Ogden (2001: 208, n. 18), cephalomancy or the prophecy of decapitated heads, is an ancient belief that stretches as far back as the Minoan civilization. Orpheus is perhaps the most well known of the mythic personalities whose decapitated head was said to have prophesied. After he was torn to pieces, his head supposedly floated to the island of Lesbos, where it is believed the head fell into a cleft in the rock and began to utter prophecies (Ogden 2001: 208). Eliade (1970: 391) writes that Orpheus was a true shaman figure, with his journey into the underworld, his skill at healing and music, and most importantly, his ability to divine. This mantic background is probably where his decapitated head gained its ability to divine. Another tale of a cephalomancy involved a man named Polycritus, an Aetolian, who passed on after four days of married life. His widow bore their child, and the ghost of Polycritus appeared, demanding that the people give him the child. The people refused, but not to be denied, Polycritus snatched up the child and ate all of it, bar the head, which from then on prophesied the imminent destruction of the local people (Brisson 2002: 8-12). Indeed, the peculiarity of the

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to make it appear as though he were a decapitated, talking head. They charged R25 for anyone who wished to see or consult the 'head'.

talking head is but one form in a long line of strange rituals and rites that were believed to offer a glimpse of the future to the accomplished diviner or wizard.

This chapter has been concerned primarily with the ritual or the manner in which diviners accomplished their objective of attaining otherwise hidden knowledge. I investigated dreams as the most obvious point of coincidence between Greek and Zulu beliefs, and emphasised a number of points in which the two cultures do hold a good deal in common. Naturally there would also be some rather large differences since the two cultures in question approached life in very different ways, the Greeks for example making use of literacy (to a small extent), while the Zulu remained an orally based culture. The points of coincidence in the belief in the divining power of the dream do however point towards some sort of universal interpretation of human existence, the elements of which (like the snake) seem to appear in many other cultures as well. I then approached the topic of oracular divination, and proceeded to make a case for certain forms of Zulu divining, particularly the 'whistling' diviner, to be included in this otherwise ancient form of prophecy. I utilised the Delphic oracle as a case study for ancient oracular divination in general, and was able to point out that several ideas in the Delphic rituals and some points of politics (see particularly Whittaker 1965) do have striking similarities in the Zulu diviner's sanctuary and protocols that surround it. Of course the small hut of a Zulu diviner can in no way match the grandeur of the Delphic sanctuary, but this is not really the point. Rather it is the way in which both cultures approached this specific form of divination that makes the study interesting. I then turned to the ancient necromantic rites, and again noted many points of congruence, particularly since the Zulu religion is based in large part around the influence of the ancestor shades and the ability of the *isangoma* to divine with their help. This therefore

provides a fascinating comparison to necromancy in ancient Greece, since the spirits of the ancestors of the Greeks were what people used to divine in the practice of necromancy. The final major component of this chapter was divination using omens, first bird omens and then more general ones. Bird divination had several similarities, especially in predicting future weather patterns as well as in the forecasting of good or ill for a person's future. This could be explained due to the Greeks and the Zulu both having their roots as agrarian and hunting societies, and therefore the weather was an important aspect of their lives. Because of the differences inherent in the two societies, the objects used in more general omen reading were of course seen to be different as well. However, they still attempted to predict similar outcomes like suffering or good fortune. I closed the chapter with a brief look at the divinations of severed heads, primarily because it provided an interesting similarity with the so-called 'head' diviner of Zulu lore. In conclusion, although in many ways there are strong differences between the rituals that these two societies used for their prophecy, the core at each system is similar, not only because they obviously wanted to know about the same things (that is the human condition after all) but because of a great respect for the power of the unknown when it was produced credibly, and because of a close affinity to their honoured dead.



### **Chapter V: Conclusions.**

Now that my discussion of the aspects of Greek and Zulu divination is complete, it falls to me to bring together everything that has been studied and offer some sort of useful conclusions. Several questions also need to be answered as well, the most important of these probably being why this investigation is relevant at all.

I should like to begin by quoting a remarkable anecdote mentioned by Heidi Holland (2001: 199):

‘Some years ago, a young English schoolmaster named Allan Smith arrived at a remote village school near Gweru in Zimbabwe. Feeling out of place with no knowledge of the local language or culture, the Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) teacher seized the first opportunity to participate in a conversation with his African colleagues over tea in the staff room. They were heatedly discussing a recent witchcraft incident – some of them challenging the imagery of witches riding naked on hyenas at night and some endorsing it – when Allan Smith told them: “In my country, we used to have women who wore long black dresses with tall black hats and rode on broomsticks at night.” There was a long silence, until one of the teachers who believed in African witches declared scornfully: “That’s stupid!”’

The irony of this story illustrates what I am trying to accomplish by doing this research in the first place. Holland’s story underscores the existence of cultural differences even in a phenomenon as universal as the belief in the supernatural. The story also illustrates the relativism of belief, in that the Zimbabwean teacher scorned Allan Smith’s notion of a witch because it did not fit in with his own culturally based understanding of witchcraft. The religion of the Zulu people is entirely interwoven with the fibre of their culture and society (Hale 2000: 70). This was also true of the early Greeks for whom religion was an inescapable part of their lives. In a modern world that does its best to segregate church and state, this is something that is difficult to grasp. I therefore began this study with the concept of belief, investigating the

religious systems that underpinned these two peoples' understandings of the world of the supernatural. Both the Greeks and the Zulu believed in an afterlife, which was inhabited by the spirits of the departed. The Zulu hold that those so-called shades of their ancestors live a life that is very much the same as the one they left behind in death. These shades are thought to have great power over living relatives and the ability to prophesy stems from their power and closeness to the divine. The Greeks conceived of the underworld a little differently, believing the dead to be largely impotent, although they were propitiated in a similar manner to the Zulu shades. Simultaneously the Greeks believed in the existence of the Olympian deities, who, after the disappearance of the cult of the dead, came to be the major focus of all religious activity with the hero cult included to a lesser degree. Thus while the Zulu diviner's power derives entirely from the favour of the ancestor shades, the Greeks believed their divination arose originally from the father of the gods, Zeus, who chose to share his power with his son Apollo. Whereas all Zulu divination could be termed necromantic, for its strong links with the ancestor shades, the Greeks understood necromancy to be a part of the greater whole of divination, with dreams, oracular divination, reading omens, and other rituals being different ways of approaching the same subject. Ultimately it does not appear that the ritual was always important since the knowledge or information was rooted in the same source. In a good deal of cases (e.g. dreams and necromancy) this source was the earth itself. Indeed it seemed that for a good many forms of Greek and Zulu prophecy it was the earth that was the origin of mantic power.

The next chapter concerned both the men and the women who trained to become diviners. I began by recognising that of all the diviners that were active at some time

among the Greeks and the Zulu, a good portion would have been fraudsters and outright liars. However, from the research that I have collected, it is also clear that there were 'true' diviners, the 'Real McCoy' so to speak, whose prophecies and utterances came true and therefore they would have been held in a much higher regard. It is these 'true' diviners that are the primary concern of this investigation.

The divisions that occurred between diviners that actually exhibited some mantic talent was not one that occurs along gender lines, but rather one that existed in the context of the inspiration versus technique dichotomy. What I mean is that a diviner who was actually inspired or possessed by a spirit or god, was perceived as far superior to any person who had merely learned and practiced some manmade technique like palmistry. For the ancient Greeks, the male/female dynamic was not very important, as one's sex did not impact upon whether one could become a diviner. As I noted, two of the more illustrious of the mythological Greek diviners were Teiresias and Cassandra, a man and a woman respectively (although Teiresias was said to have spent time as both). The majority of Zulu diviners were however female, and this was explained in terms of the belief that women tended to exist closer to the margin of life and death, and so were closer to the shades, with whose power one divined. The final point of relevance that I addressed was termed the 'psychology' of the diviner, or more simply, what could motivate certain people to believe that they could foretell the future in the first place. I also suggested that schizotypal personality disorder could be a viable medical diagnosis for the 'condition' of, as the Zulu put it, having a 'soft head' or being a 'true' diviner. For both the Greeks and the Zulu there was thus some sort of suffering involved in obtaining the mantic gift, with blindness a common manifestation of this idea for the Greeks, and general ill health being a



constant for Zulu diviners, particularly before and during their training when they first encounter the shades.

My final chapter was an analysis of several of the more common modes of divining. I investigated the four major modes of Zulu divination in conjunction with several ancient methods, including dreams, oracular divination, omen reading and necromancy. Oneiromancy or dream divination was said to be the most ancient method, and one that had much in common with its usage among the Zulu and the Greeks. Psychologically this might even be explained at a basic human level, since as it turns out, many similar symbols occur in the dreams of both peoples and tend to also be interpreted in a similar manner. The theory of dream divining also states that both peoples believed that dreams had their ultimate origin in the earth, with the Zulu notion being that the shades create them and the archaic Greek belief holding that they came from the so-called Gates of Dreams. Therefore it appears that in the art of oneiromancy there existed several striking similarities in the beliefs of the Greeks and the Zulu that can perhaps be explained along the lines of the Jungian 'collective unconscious', since these are two peoples that probably never had any historical contact to be able to transmit these sort of ideas.

As I stated, oracular divination was the province of the ancient world, with its numerous religious sanctuaries like Delphi, as the highpoint of divining at the time. I put forward the argument that although on a smaller scale, the divinations of a particular Zulu diviner, the *abemilozi*, could be suggested as an oracle for the Zulu society, where like the oracular sanctuaries of the ancient world, each diviner's hut was also a sacred space in which his or her divinations were conducted. Although the

Greek method of divining through an oracle involved a good deal more pomp and ceremony than its Zulu counterpart, there is in my opinion very little to differentiate the two at a basic level (if one puts aside the Greek pantheon of gods for a moment).

The art of omen reading (kledonomanancy) and the ability to divine by watching the flight and behaviour of birds (oionomanancy) are common to both the Greeks and the Zulu. Whereas the ancient understanding of bird divination entailed a very elaborate system by which weal and woe could be foretold through the flight of a certain fowl, the Zulu were far more interested in what the behaviour of particular birds foretold about coming weather patterns, although some birds did also portend evil happenings and the like. Omen reading also had a good deal of commonality, particularly as concerned involuntary motions of the body like sneezing. I believe this congruency to be the result of similar notions of spirit and soul that were held by both the Greeks and the Zulu.

Necromancy, the art of divination as relates to the dead, is perhaps the most strikingly similar form of divining that these two peoples share. Because both societies held such a distinct appreciation for the position of their deceased relatives in their lives, both the Greeks and the Zulu saw a certain power in the dead. The shades hold a good deal of authority over the lives of their relatives, and this is shown in the propitiation of the shades that occurs at many points in the traditional Zulu existence. The Greeks likewise went through several stages of development in their understanding of the spirits of the dead, initially taking part in a 'grave' cult not unlike that of the Zulu and then progressing to a more singularly directed cult of the heroes, which in some instances bears similarity to the honouring of the great ancestors (particular chiefs and

great forebears) by the Zulu. Both peoples maintained a belief in the ability of people to divine through the spirits of the departed. This led the Greeks to establish certain sites of oracular divination that functioned with the assistance of the deceased. For the Zulu however, this was not necessary because all of their forms of divination functioned through the favour of the ancestor shades and did not need to be separated out, as was the case with necromancy in ancient Greece, which, because of its association with the dead was sidelined to some extent, with more accepted forms of prophecy like those granted by Apollo taking over (Necromancy was born of Hades and of the earth). Because of the centrality of the shades in their lives, this did not happen among the Zulu.

I discussed several forms of divination that occur among the Zulu as well, with the 'thumb' diviner receiving due mention as a fraud, and the particularly interesting diviners who throw the bones. Diviners of this sort occur across the African continent and bear some similarity to the Greek phenomenon of divination by lots, in which stones or beans were most often used to answer simple yes or no questions. For the Greeks the lot oracle never became as well refined as it did among the Zulu bone throwers, who can predict far more than the answers to yes or no questions with their animal bones.

I concluded the chapter with the strange phenomenon of the prophecy of severed heads, particularly relevant because of the practice of a certain Zulu diviner, called the 'head' diviner, who became possessed for short periods by the shades. It is the 'head' reference that is important here, because it illustrates another similarity in the basic spiritual beliefs of these two peoples, namely that the head was often thought to be the



vessel of the spirit. This is also a connection to the idea of a sneeze being portentous, which both the Greeks and the Zulu also agreed upon.

Lambert (1995) provided a similar discussion to my own in his paper discussing the similarities between Hippocratic medicine and traditional Zulu techniques. Ultimately he concluded that the two systems shared a good deal of common ground in their methods and treatments. The major difference between the two lies in the fact that the Greeks, although 'they were not the first to diagnose and treat some medical cases without reference to postulated divine or daemonic agencies', they were 'the first to express a category of the 'magical' and to attempt to exclude it from medicine' (Lloyd 1979: 232). This means that the Greeks essentially created the first incarnation of rational, scientific medicine, even though magical and religious cures continued to exist side-by-side with science. As Lloyd (1979: 4) comments earlier on, the 'irrational' is always there, developing along with science, right through to the Middle Ages. This scenario is true of modern South Africa as well, where Lambert (1995: 75) noted that approximately 80 % of all black South Africans went to a traditional healer either before or after visit to a western medical practitioner of some sort. Thus the Greeks chose to separate magic and medicine, a choice that eventually led to the modern western notion of medicine as an empirically-based undertaking, wherein the individual patient is treated on the basis of his or her condition alone. The Zulu continue to hold that the situation of the community and environment at large are also vital in successfully treating any person for any illness from the most banal cold to some form of witchcraft. Their holistic approach to life can be seen as the reason for the continued existence of divination and other magical practices among the Zulu, or, because the belief in magic is such an integral part of the way in which the Zulu

understand the world, it cannot simply be set aside merely because someone shows them a different way of understanding things. This is an identical situation to that of ancient Greece, in which most refused to set aside their superstitions and magical beliefs, despite the best efforts of philosophers and scientists.

And so the question becomes, why is this study relevant at all? I believe that through this research I have been able to show a basic commonality of both the understanding of, and belief in the power of the spirit for the Zulu and the Greeks. This links the people of ancient Greece, who were thought to be the origin of western science, with the beliefs of the Zulu nation. In the age of the African Renaissance, the fact that this level of parity between Africa and the West can be demonstrated, is truly something that particularly African academics should be striving to take note of. On the spiritual plane I have shown that the Greeks and the Zulu, separated by a vast amount of time and distance, still held similar notions to be true of the human soul and its encounter with the divine. Perhaps this is just a success for the Jungians amongst us. Perhaps it is something more. What this sort of research ultimately allows for is the celebration of differences (not to sound too simplistic) or rather an emphasis of what makes the Greeks or the Zulu truly distinctive and separate from each other. As Lambert (1995: 80) closed his paper, as do I, with the hope that research like this will show South Africa and the modern world in general that the study of ancient history still has something to offer in terms of being relevant to our lives today. There are still lessons to be learned from the ancients and from our own indigenous peoples, lessons that western science may not yet understand.

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