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READING THE ENTRAILS: ANALYSIS OF AN AFRICAN DIVINATION DISCOURSE

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The divinatory reading of animal intestines, a cultural practice widespread in East Africa but hardly given attention in the anthropological literature, is analyzed in terms of a veiled but manifest communicative strategy, constrained by cultural premisses. The 'relevance theory' of Sperber and Wilson (1986) is used. The case study presented is from the Me'en ethnic group of south-western Ethiopia. The Me'en were formerly agro-pastoralists, but are now subsistence cultivators and hunter-gatherers. On the basis of a description of two types of intestine-reading, it is argued that while there is a set of rules underlying the discourse of entrail-reading, it is the body of tacit, social, contextual clues which sets the bounds of 'meaning' of the message in the entrails – details of the physical structure of the intestines have no determinate meaning in themselves. The meaning is a construction emerging from the reading as a communicative event, activating in an indirect manner the presuppositions of the 'audience' *while* conveying the intention of the speaker(s) who interpret(s) the 'message'.

Introduction

In the study of magic, religion and related phenomena such as spirit possession and shamanism, anthropologists have usually succeeded in demonstrating the 'rationality' and meaningfulness of discourse produced in such contexts. Various other domains of 'non-referential' and semi-propositional discourse in preliterate societies, however, remain relatively unexplored.

This article discusses one little-known example in the genre: the 'reading' of animal entrails, technically known as haruspication. This particular form of divination, of course, is known from antiquity (Rome, Greece, the Inca empire), though commentators often dismissed it out of hand as superstition, bizarre folklore or worse. Surprisingly, in modern anthropology, haruspication as such has not been taken very seriously either. Studies of it are few indeed. In a recent work on African divination systems, Peek has suggested that, in general 'remarkably little work has been done on these systems of knowledge', and that most of the work done has been 'too functionalist' (Peek 1991: 1). While this may be somewhat exaggerated (see Jackson 1978; Turner 1975; Mendonsa 1982; Werbner 1989; Zeitlyn 1987; 1990), the present discussion, based on south Ethiopian examples, is part of an effort to acknowledge the often central importance of divination in many societies. It shows, furthermore, that the divinatory reading of *entrails* is a specific discursive genre in itself, understanding of which can help in more fully assessing the range of human discourse and cultural communication.

The initial commonsense problem of entrail – or intestine – reading is briefly this. How can statements which purportedly predict the future from arbitrary animal parts convey a message and meaning to people, i.e., have a communicative function? More specifically, what are the cognitive and communicative effects of the discourse of entrail-reading, how does meaning emerge, and how is it communicated ‘inferentially’ in such non-direct social discourse? In answering these questions, I follow an emerging paradigm in language and cognition studies, trying to steer a middle course between the Scylla of formalism and the Charybdis of functionalism in the study of language (cf. Tyler 1978: 15–16) and giving a central place to pragmatics.¹ Entrail-reading can also be seen as a ‘non-normal’ mode of discourse, to use Peek’s term (1991: 205): an attempt to integrate linear-analytical and synthetic-analogical thinking in order to effect cognitive and/or behavioural change. I will illustrate this with reference to Sperber and Wilson’s model of indirect, ostensive communication, as set out in their important but in anthropology somewhat neglected book: *Relevance* (1986).² Recourse to this model supports the view that much of communication is not verbally explicit (‘non-linguistic’, cf. Bloch 1991) and works along the lines of inference and displacement, or, in the words of Tyler (1978), depends to a large extent upon what remains unsaid.

Entrail-reading as communicative discourse

For the purposes of this discussion, entrail-reading will be defined as the production of verbal statements about the future of one or more persons and/or a community by recognized ‘readers’-interpreters of the intestine structure of a slaughtered domestic animal procured from within the community. The often puzzling and ‘nonsensical’ statements at an entrail-reading could be analyzed in terms of their ‘symbolic’ or emotive content. However, this would be missing the point. As the people concerned also emphasize, entrail-reading is manifestly an attempt to gain more knowledge, i.e., it is a cognitive strategy, and the readings should first be assessed as purposeful communicative events of major importance.

What makes entrail-reading intriguing as far as its communicative function is concerned is not only its indirect style of discourse, but also the fact that it has more or less fixed reference points rooted in the *physical* structure of the intestines: their colour, size, form, position. Here we come to the general question of how to explain what makes intestines good to read. The interpretation of what is actually ‘seen’ in the entrails is set in a cultural frame, which defines part of the ‘cognitive environment’ of the ethno-cultural group in question,³ though the fact that there is, in principle, a *limited* range of physical clues must exert some constraints on their ultimate interpretation. I return to this below.

The main starting point here is that entrail-reading can fruitfully be considered as a special communicative language, rooted in the meta-representational ability of humans (Sperber 1985: 84). This means that the statements not only refer to the natural environment, but also allow people to disbelieve or to doubt, and to process information not (yet) fully understood (Sperber 1985). If seen as elements in a communicative encounter, the statements made during entrail-readings

clearly have an informative and a communicative *intention* (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1986: 61) to be conveyed to the participants.

To explain the human communication process, Sperber and Wilson (1986) present an improved *inferential* model of communication, encompassing and going beyond the popular 'code model' and the older versions of the inferential model (e.g., that of philosopher Paul Grice, to whom they extensively refer). In the cognitive-psychological view, it is claimed that a certain pragmatism orients communication, since communication is a process which carries a 'guarantee of *relevance*' of the information submitted to others by a speaker. The speaker 'intends' something with his/her utterances, something which makes a difference to the hearers. Sperber and Wilson elaborate this as follows: the communicator-speaker's 'stimulus' (utterance) carries an *informative* intention, 'to inform the audience of something' and a *communicative* intention, 'to inform the audience of one's informative intention' (1986: 29). This intention must be recognized. To anticipate the examples below: in the context of entrail-reading it is obvious that the hearers expect a statement of judgement from the intestines, guided but not pre-determined by the 'expert'. Furthermore, communication assumes a *mutual cognitive environment* (1986: 41), a mutual understanding about what people in this environment share, by way of a set of common assumptions and knowledge of facts. Within this environment, utterances are susceptible to interpretation by the hearers, who are guided by what Grice has called the 'cooperative principle' in communication, which is in its turn predicated on certain maxims (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1986: 33-4).

The underlying general goal in communication is to maximize the *relevance* of the information processed (1986: 49), i.e., the hearers are forced to combine new and old information in a synthetic way (cf. Peek 1991: 205). From the speaker's point of view, this first of all implies *ostensive* behaviour: making manifest an intention to make something manifest (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 49). In other words, a double effort is required from the speaker: to indicate the relevance of some information together with showing the intention to do so. Sperber and Wilson claim this is a general feature of verbal communication among humans, whether they are conscious of it or not. The guarantee of relevance is an integral part of this ostensive behaviour, though note that this ostension does not imply the transmission of any precise content (i.e., any transparent or self-evident message) and it does not 'prescribe' semantic reality for the hearers (it is often non-demonstrative). Indeed, this is one of the characteristics of this elegant formal theory of human communication: the explanatory claim made for it is that the inferential process is *initiated* by the utterances and then runs its course in a deductive manner. Only the communicative intention is manifest. This manifest-ness, is, as Sperber and Wilson (1986: 60-1) state, also of crucial *social* importance: it affects people's possibilities of interaction. The speaker who 'directs' the slice of communication thus provides the hearers with an opportunity to fulfil the former's informative intention (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 61), although this opportunity is not always taken. That the communicative process is, nevertheless, so often successful, is to be explained by the principle of relevance mentioned earlier. Sperber and Wilson describe it as follows (1986: 158): 'Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal

relevance'. Communicative statements are uttered and received with an assumption of being in some way relevant and are thus inferentially 'processed' further. Relevance is a formal, psychological property of the communicative statements of a speaker. This does not mean that people 'use' this principle in communication – it is simply present, as a precondition for any communicative behaviour to take place (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1986: 162). The utterances of a speaker must be relevant enough to have effect, and to claim the attention of the hearers (they require a certain level of relevance). Hearers assess the communicative intention against their own background knowledge, and infer from it its probable (but non-demonstrative) meaning. This often goes by way of implicatures (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 194), i.e., the use of additional assumptions and conclusions to preserve the application of the co-operative principle (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1986: 35). An apparent 'violation' of this principle can thus be prevented. On the basis of implicature, ambiguity and vagueness in discourse can still have their communicative effect.

In the context of an entrail-reading, the level of relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 161) of the utterances is set by the occasion and culturally defined: by the 'standard' meaning of the colours and form of the entrails, and by the background knowledge of social relations. On the basis of these, the hearers are capable of relating the utterances to their own assumptions and of deriving inferences. They thus respond to, or fulfil, the communicative intention. It is worth noting here, in passing, that as elaborated by Sperber and Wilson (1986) 'relevance theory' has not yet sufficiently addressed the issue of the effect of cultural variability on discourse procedures.

The case of the Tishana-Me'en

If we try to locate the phenomenon of entrail-reading in space and time, we see that this practice is fairly common among agro-pastoralist peoples in East Africa, including southwest Ethiopia⁴. However, few monographs on those known to practise entrail-reading – the Sudanese Nilotes, Ethio-Kenyan Cushitic-speaking groups, or the various 'Para-Nilotic' peoples (like the Karimojong, Nyangatom, Topotha, Jie, Turkana) – contain any reference to it. (For a few exceptions, see Peristiany 1951; Thomas 1965; Beattie 1967). Some scant references are available from south-east Surmic-speaking peoples in the Ethiopian southwest (Suri, Bodi, Mursi) or in southern Sudan (Murle, Didinga, Narim), and it is from one such group, the Me'en, that I draw my examples⁵.

Intestine-reading figures prominently in the life of all Ethiopian Surmic-speaking groups, including the Me'en, who have (or have had) an agro-pastoral subsistence base. One large sub-group of the Me'en, called *Tishana*, were agro-pastoral in the recent past, but are now largely an agricultural group. They still share a common language and similar cultural and historical traditions with the Bodi, who live in the lowlands southeast, across the Omo River, and both groups call themselves 'Me'en'. In the absence of published comparative material on the Bodi, who seem to have retained this practice in a more intact form (cf. Haberland 1959: 410; Klausberger 1981: 241; and K. Fukui, personal communication), I discuss only the *Tishana-Me'en* case.

The Tishana are located in a hilly bushland and savannah area north and west of the junction of the Omo and Shorum rivers in the Kāfa region of southwestern Ethiopia. They are shifting cultivators/hunter-gatherers, numbering c. 51,000. They live in dispersed compounds or hamlets. Most households are polygamous and are usually found in the area of the senior male's 'patri-clan' (*kabuchoch*) or 'patri-lineage' (*du'ut*) (see Abbink 1992b). Me'en socio-political structure is egalitarian, without chiefs, and without notable differences in wealth. The Tishana practise rain-fed cultivation, but the rains are unreliable and occasional famines occur.⁶ Apart from growing maize, sorghum, tubers and some wheat, teff (*Eragrostis abyssinica*) and garden crops, they maintain small numbers of domestic animals (cattle, goats, sheep and chickens). Livestock is the main repository of wealth of the Tishana, but compared to their Bodi brethren across the Omo River, the Tishana are rather poor in cattle. They have no large herds and thus cannot even be called agro-pastoralists. They seem gradually to have lost this agro-pastoralist way of life after ecological problems (rinderpest, expansion of the tsetse fly area), subsequent migrations (north from the Omo Valley), and intermingling with the predominantly agricultural 'Gimira' (Bench, Shé) and Dizi peoples (cf. Abbink 1990; 1992b). As elsewhere in Africa, cattle are more prestigious and valuable than sheep and goats and are used in bridewealth exchanges. Cattle are killed only in the event of a burial, a rain-making ceremony, a serious illness, during treatment by a spirit medium, or for divination, and on all such occasions part of the meat is usually consumed. With three neighbouring peoples the Me'en (Bodi as well as Tishana) have a relationship of enmity: the Suri, Ch'ara and Konta. Although linked to the wider political and economic framework of Ethiopia since the early decades of this century, the Tishana live in a largely self-sufficient economy and society. For the maintenance of internal social order, they seldom apply to external authorities and rely instead on their own traditional ritual leaders, elders and diviners.

Animals as mediators

Among the Me'en, the intestines used for consultation always come from domestic animals (cattle, goats, occasionally sheep), and never from the animals of the bush. Indeed, when I asked the Me'en if it would be useful to read the intestines of one of their popular game animals, Swayne's Hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus swaynei*; in Me'en *shigin*), they laughed and claimed that this could 'of course' not be done: what could they possibly tell them? In other words, the 'message' would have no relationship to them and would find no expert reader. Domestic stock animals, on the other hand, are part of the social as well as of the natural world, and the Me'en implicitly assume that domestic animals can be the prime 'mediators' between these two worlds, and that they can be 'vehicles of meaning'. Hilarious laughter also greeted my question about the use of chicken entrails for divination (as was the case in Bunyoro, cf. Beattie 1967: 221-2).

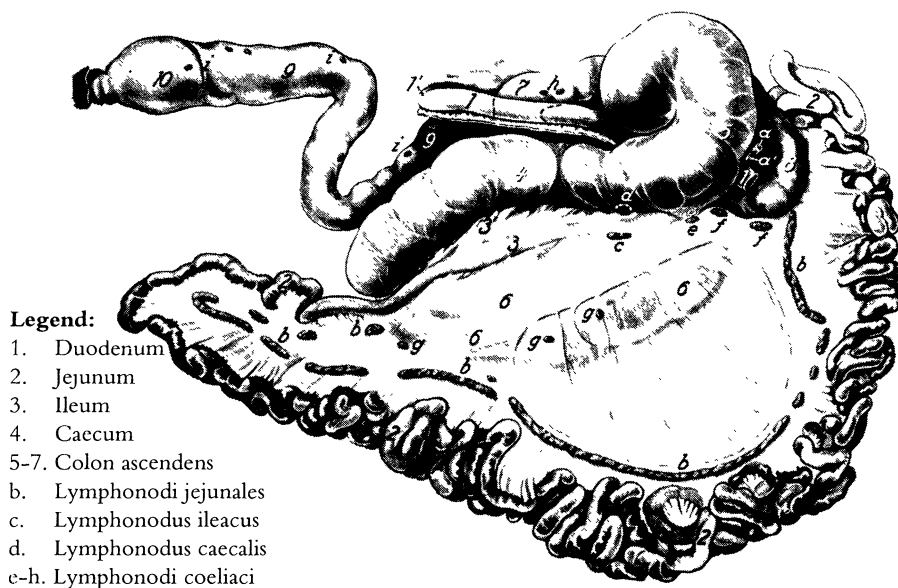
Only cattle and goats can 'mediate' between the socio-cultural domain and natural forces, since, having traditionally formed the economic and ideological basis of Me'en life they are, so to speak, the traditional 'migratory monitors' of the interaction between humans and the environment. This may *a fortiori* be said for any transhumant agro-pastoral group, e.g., the Bodi, the Mursi (cf. Turton

1979: 190), the Suri (Abbink, fieldnotes) or the Hamar (cf. Strecker 1979: 116). As an ethnographic aside, one may ask why then do the sedentary agricultural peoples (such as the Ethiopian Maale, Dime and Aari) have the practice? It can be argued that they took it over from the agro-pastoralist groups surrounding them and who exerted a strong cultural influence upon them. However, there are important differences between the two groups: the sedentary groups read only sheep entrails, which they use only as an oracle to decide yes-or-no questions of a mainly personal nature. In a sense, they use the entrails as a *mirror*, confronting participants with their own problems or with supernatural entities acting as the result of their own mistakes or transgressions. The Me'en entrail-readings, however, additionally function as a *model*: of the well-being of the land, the homestead, or the area as a whole. In the latter case, the entrails are seen as a map of the Me'en country from which future developments can be read (cf. Turton 1979: 189-90 on the Mursi case). This aspect is especially evident in the case of an entrail-reading at the inauguration of a new 'rain-master' (*komorut*), the traditional ritual leader among the Me'en. On such an occasion it is crucial to assess the state of the land and of the community as a whole.

It is in this context that the idea of a language, a system of interpretation of what to outsiders are arbitrary physical signs, must be considered. A purely sociological analysis of the functions of entrail-reading might perhaps be relatively easy to provide: an examination of the social position and networks of readers and the audience would reveal patterns with predictable characteristics – past tensions, outstanding problems, and so on, for which the participants, forced to live with each other, seek a solution, a re-establishing of social harmony. But this functionalist analysis would be rather trivial (cf. also Peek's criticism, 1991: 2). The interesting point for further study – and admitting here that comparative data on the 'text' and 'context' of the readings may often not be sufficient – is the system of propositions it contains, and the underlying clues of relevance in the discourse. A critical point here is the anchoring of the discourse and its emergent meaning in the *regular* physical properties of the entrails: spots on parts like the jejunum, the ileum, the caecum, on the mucous membrane or the colon ascendens (see fig. 1), and whether shades such as red, yellow or black always mean something. Irregular lines and clots in the blood-vessels (*arteriae jejunales*, *lymphonodi*) and connecting parts like the membrane and the *ligamentae* are similarly examined for clues of relevance. Before elaborating this further, I describe the Tishana practice of entrail-reading.

Types of reading

While Tishana entrail-readings (called *or ch'oloch*, or *nyèrèya-ch'oloch*) are always concerned with producing statements about the future and as such can all be considered as 'divination', I explicitly follow my informants in distinguishing two types of reading according to their emphasis: oracular (*ch'oloch*) and public-divinatory readings (*nyèrèya-ch'oloch*). The first kind comprises the readings done to decide on immediate, short-term queries; they are carried out on behalf of specific individuals, for *personal* purposes: e.g., will a sick person get well again, will a woman survive a difficult pregnancy or birth, will a proposed marriage be auspicious, will a journey go well? Among the Me'en, there are no general

**Legend:**

1. Duodenum
2. Jejunum
3. Ileum
4. Caecum
- 5-7. Colon ascendens
- b. Lymphonodi jejunales
- c. Lymphonodus ileacus
- d. Lymphonodus caecalis
- e-h. Lymphonodi coeliaci

FIGURE 1. Intestines of cattle. Source: Nickle, Schummer & Seiferle 1960: p. 169.

predictions made for the community as a whole.⁷ Public-divinatory readings refer to readings for *collective* purposes: will the *community* (homestead, lineage, or even the Me'en people in general) prosper or be affected by disaster, will there be drought or war, will the government inflict new hardships, will epidemics hit the cattle or the people, or (in the past, when Tishana were still more of a cattle-herding people) will raiders attack, or will a raid on a neighbouring group be successful? During most collective rituals, e.g. a funeral ceremony, a harvest ceremony, an important wedding, the entrails of slaughtered cattle are automatically read. But on such public occasions, no statements are made concerning the future of specific individuals, except perhaps the *komorut*, because he is a mediating, priest-like figure with some responsibility for the community as a whole.

It is difficult, in view of this nominal distinction, to give a 'proto-typical' description of the Tishana entrail-reading i.e., a description of which would reveal the basic procedural form of this practice.⁸ As we shall see from the examples given below, the *occasion* determines the type of reading, the kind of information gleaned, the number of readers, and the main reader. The latter can be either a *men-de-nyerey* (diviner-magician), a ranking male (*ti'a*) or an elder (*k'abale*) of a specific lineage, or, in the case of an oracular reading, the oldest agnatic male relative of a deceased person.⁹ There is always a main reader, an acknowledged 'expert'. While the procedures followed may differ according to the occasion of a reading, the style of veiled discourse is always similar, as the following examples illustrate.

Occasions of reading

Two cases are presented to illustrate Tishana entrail-reading.

- 1 **The oracular type.** One morning, a woman collapsed in her hut. She had just come back from a small pond outside the hamlet where she had

brought the family goats to drink and graze. After being struck down, she could neither move nor speak and in subsequent days she withered away. She was unable to eat or drink properly. Her frantic husband tried all sorts of medicines (traditional herbs and roots, some modern medicine from the nearby government clinic, magical prayers by Amhara people living in the area),¹⁰ but to no avail. On the third day, the husband ordered Onyái, an old man from the Gudon clan (a respected ‘mediator’ clan in the area), known as an expert in the art of intestine reading, to come to his house to consult the entrails to see whether his wife would live or die. For this purpose, he procured a young black-and-white goat (in Me’en: *ludi*, a favourite coat-colour) from a local Amhara. The whole process was led by Onyái in the compound of the family. The reading can be divided into four phases as follows:

a) Water from a gourd container was drunk by Berguwa, the husband, and sprayed over the goat. The remaining water was then poured out over the left hand of Berguwa, which was held above the part of the goat where the intestines are located. Then he quickly slit the throat of the animal. The blood was caught in a calabash container, to be used later. The intestines (in Me’en: *ch’olóch*) were then taken out by Onyái and carefully spread out on the grass, the top part directed toward the Omo valley (where the Me’en originated).

b) The reading began. Although Onyái was the person responsible for the proper reading, the interpretation of what the entrails might say was a collective, dialogic one: Onyái made a suggestion, to which the other male adults present responded. Not all such interjections are reproduced in the following text, which was transcribed from a tape-recording in Me’en. Some explanations, including the technical names of parts of the intestines, are given in square brackets.¹¹

- 1.1 Onyái: I see the intestines are clear.¹²
- 1.2 Others: They are, there are no blemishes.
- 1.3 Onyái: Is this the road, is the road good? [pointing to the big arteria jejunale]
- 1.4 Others: This is good. What are these men? [= dark spots near two lymphonodi jejunales and a lymphonodum coeliacum on the left side]. They come to here.
- 1.5 Onyái: Here it is clean and white [pointing to the large right side of the mucous membrane]. This must be the rain, the water. It will continue.
- 1.6 Others: It is rain, this is rain, it has not ended yet.
- 1.7 Onyái: The red ropes here [pointing to four red arteriae jejunales between the jejunum and the central part of the membrane], it is rope again, these people will be led away soon, they will leave the Me’en country.
- 1.8 Others: There are ropes, it looks bad, they are going.
- 1.9 Onyái: These three here [three small growths, probably lymphonodi jejunales again, near the small intestines, near the ileum entrance], aren’t they good? Are these two [two white ones] the children, aren’t they well?
- 1.10 Others: Where? They are white, they are white; and this one, the white with red?
- 1.11 Onyái: The intestines are clean, they are good. The red [pointing to the lymphonodus ileacus], isn’t it the hearth [=of the family’s compound]? There is no black.

- 1.12 Onyái: No black. It is the woman. The fire is burning.
- 1.13 Onyái: They are well, they are well. Here, this white, there is no evil in her. No bad words touched her [pointing to a fourth white knot, another lymphonodum jejunale, somewhat further from the other three, which might have indicated an eventual curse of a magician].
- 1.14 Others: Is it clean? It's good, no one wants to hit her.
- 1.15 Onyái: These small ones [probably the left jejunum] are they mixed?¹³ The white and dark, they are not mixed? No one has died.
- 1.16 Others: The small ones have no problem.
- 1.17 Onyái: The red spots here are very few, and there are none on the roads here [pointing to the largest two connecting arteriae on the right side of the membrane].
- 1.18 Others: There is red there only. It is the fire-place, isn't it? Is there something else? It may be good, it may be good.
- 1.19 Onyái: The entrails are clear (...) Let's proceed with the other thing, let's cast away the blood.

This concluded the reading and initiated the next phase in the process.¹⁴ As we see, no clear or conclusive interpretation was made by Onyái. Still, I suggest that this reading session was effective and got its sobering message across, since through his displacement strategy Onyái's comments gave evidence of an informative intention which hearers (guided by the principle of relevance) tried to make sense of in receiving the entrails' message. At the time of the reading I was not of this opinion and I thought that Onyái had suggested that the woman would recover: the 'oracle' had spoken, and no death was clearly announced. Examining the reading in terms of communication theory, as I will do below, will show why I was mistaken.

c) The liver and part of the shoulder of the goat was roasted on the fire outside the hut. It was thought by Berguwa and some relatives that his wife might have been hit by a *k'olle*, a malevolent local spirit of the place where she had brought the goats that day.¹⁵ Onyái took the liver and part of the meat and gave it with both hands to Berguwa, who then threw the pieces in the garden, to the north and south, while repeating a spell addressed to the *k'olle* to leave the woman in peace. After this, the blood of the goat (in the gourd) was poured into a fresh *enset* leaf (*Ensete edulis* L.). It was brought into the hut and put on the floor beside the sick wife. Berguwa moved his feet twice through the blood, before his wife was made to do the same. The leaf was then dragged out of the hut and thrown away (signifying the casting out of the possible evil influence of the *k'olle*).

d) the remainder of the blood, the liver, the meat and part of the chyme of the goat's stomach were then mixed in the same gourd container and thrown away in the 'forest' (or at least outside the hamlet and the gardens) by a grandson of Onyái, who had come with him.

The last two phases are obviously not part of the entrail-reading proper, but they indicate something of the context of an oracular entrail-reading, which is primarily concerned with the health and well-being of a patient on whose behalf it is done. When a 'therapy' or a treatment is necessary, it is carried out (cf. Kronenberg 1972: 150 for a Didinga case and Amborn

et al. 1980: 130 for the Dullay).¹⁶ Such a phase is absent in public-divinatory readings. After this treatment (phases c and d) the ceremony was concluded, and the waiting began.

Five days later, the woman died. She had never spoken again. Several people (especially some young people and myself) were stunned and puzzled: were the entrails wrong, or had the reading been a fake or the work of an amateur? Some days later, I met Onyái on the road. I asked him how he could have been wrong. Had the entrails been lying? He answered quietly:

Listen, I saw the three spots near the small intestines, the homestead place they call it. One of them had a lot of red. I knew that was bad, but I didn't say anything. I was the only one responsible there, I knew how to 'see' them. I could not take it upon me to predict her death, at that moment. Why should I do that? There would be anger and unrest and people would turn against me. But didn't you see Berguwa's reaction? He saw something. The entrails were not lying¹⁷.

This answer made me see that my question was basically superfluous: he may have known, as well as I did, that the woman was going to die. He had only tactfully left the conclusion to be drawn by the husband himself and by the others present¹⁸.

- 2 **The public-divinatory type.** This kind of reading aims at predicting future developments in a more general, community sense and thus goes beyond the oracular type, although I emphasize again that there can be no sharp dividing line between the two types. Depending upon the occasion, several 'sub-types' might be distinguished.

a) *Reading before a marriage.* The new partners, together with their close relatives, go to a magician-diviner before the final clinching of the bride-wealth-deal in order to determine whether their union will be a good one: will there be many children, is there an hereditary curse somewhere in one of the families, will the homestead prosper, will the land chosen for cultivation yield good crops, will they be spared from illness and other dangers? The prospective groom offers an animal (usually a goat) to the diviner, who then gives the prediction. He himself does not partake of the animal's meat. Often a proposed marriage deal is cancelled when subsequent readings of two or three other animals are 'bad'.

b) *At the installation of a komorut,* a hereditary 'rain-chief',¹⁹ an entrail-reading is mandatory, the cows or bulls killed being of a colour and pattern traditionally preferred by the 'clan' of this *komorut*. Many people attend such an occasion, not only those of the *komorut's* clan, but also most of the people from the area where he is active as mediator. This ritual is not as important among the Tishana as among the Bodi-Me'en, where the *komorut* has retained a much more important role (e.g., in inaugurating new fields, mediating in cases of homicide, or holding protective ceremonies for cattle). Such a reading is required for the legitimate installation of the new *komorut*, and is at the same time an attempt to see whether his 'reign' will be auspicious.

c) *Reading at a burial.* The burial ceremony is one of the most frequent occasions for entrail-reading. It is obviously a most sensitive social event for the family and the local group of which the deceased was a member, and thus one of the occasions *par excellence* for entrail-reading. As already

indicated, it allows people (like neighbours or respected community elders) to transmit and summarize ideas, opinions or feelings about the state of affairs with regard to the group to which the dead person belonged. In a sense, it is a kind of redressing the balance after one member of the collectivity has died and it allows predictions about the future circumstances of the relatives, the deceased's offspring and the area in which he/she lived. It is essential for the sons and lineal relatives of the deceased to perform or at least attend such a reading in order to gauge the attitude of the *k'alua* (the 'lineage spirit' of the ancestor group) towards the descendants, although no specific offerings and invocations are addressed to this spirit. In contrast to the Tallensi, for instance (Fortes 1987b), these ancestors are not assumed to be 'present' on this occasion.

One such burial reading was that at the funeral of an old lady of the Boli lineage of the Degit clan. The intestines of a goat whose skin was to be used as a 'wrapping' for the corpse were read first, then those of three cows. This was done by several elders, again in a collective fashion. The goat's intestines were favourable with no bad signs or irregularities, so the woman could be buried in the skin. But the entrails of the first cow killed (according to custom, by the youngest son of the woman, knocking the animal unconscious with a large stone) were less favourable. There were said to be too many red knots (i.e., like rope knots) on the small intestines. This was interpreted as danger for the other members of the family, especially for the *ti'a* (the eldest male) of the Boli lineage. The 'road' in the intestines – the arteria jejunale or major vein – was also cause for worry. The shape of the part representing the homestead, near the connexion of the mucous membrane, small guts (jejunum) and big guts (ileum and caecum) was taken to mean that the people would do better to leave the place soon after the next moon, even though crops had only recently been sown. They should go to a new place – though it could still be within Boli territory – and rebuild their huts and prepare new fields there. Specifically, they should leave their present compound along the path leading behind the garden. The second cow's intestines repeated the message; the third one was less clear. But the family knew what was meant and decided to heed the advice. Various background factors gave rise to such statements: a tense relationship between one of the wives of a son of the deceased woman and her neighbours (rivalry over cultivation plots), and the expectation of future land scarcity for the family should they stay and cultivate this area.

d) *Reading for general group decision-making.* This includes occasions at which either territorial or 'lineage' groups try to estimate the likelihood of epidemics, drought or famine, and of cattle or crop disease. Such readings can also be concerned with assessing the likelihood of conflicts with neighbouring groups (e.g. raids), or with the State or regional government. One important case of such readings was the following:

In February 1990, Girma, a Me'en leader and head of the Ganguo, an important Me'en territorial group living in the lowlands, was invited to come to the regional administrative centre to present himself to the local

government administrators. A few years before he had fled to the lowlands because of a serious conflict with one administrator, since then deposed. He also had a standing conflict with one other Me'en leader from another clan, who was on the side of the government. The administration was increasingly inclined to brand Girma as a *shifita* (an Amharic word for 'bandit', or 'rebel', here with the serious connotation of refusing to accommodate the government or even acknowledge its legitimacy). Girma, pressed to attend but reluctant to go and not trusting the government (which had, in the earlier conflict, already imprisoned him and had had two of his brothers killed in the revolutionary turmoil some eleven years previously), decided to consult the intestines to see 'whether the road was good' and whether the government could be trusted this time. A large number of his followers and relatives gathered for the reading. A *goloñi* ('red') cow was brought and killed. B'ulay, an elder of the prestigious Selakoroy clan, a trusted mediator group, was the main reader.

- 2.1 Girma: How does it look, is it good?
- 2.2 B'ulay: Look at the path, this is the path [pointing at the central arteria jejunale]. What is this?
- 2.3 Others: (...) These should not be here, it is too crowded [pointing at black spots on the left side of the central arteria].
- 2.4 Girma: It's not clear; are these people coming?
- 2.5 B'ulay: Over here ... [pointing to the wide part of the mucous membrane, below the vein], it's the water, the rain, isn't it flowing, white? What is this? [pointing to large, reddish lymphonodi jejunales on the right].
- 2.6 Others: On this side, it is too red, it is a lot. It is swollen.
- 2.7 B'ulay: The road leading here looks cramped. We have to look here.
- 2.8 Others: Who can tell. The men here ... It says people are taken away.
- 2.9 B'ulay: Isn't this the settlement [= homestead]? It is not affected, it is good. A woman is coming.
- 2.10 Girma: What does it say, what do they tell us?
- 2.11 Others: This is bad here, this is bad. It looks troubled here and [... inaudible].
- 2.12 B'ulay: It does not look clean here. The country is good. But the road is full; these people are moved away, these are dead ones [pointing to red veins and black spots crowded at the narrower left end of the arteriae jejunales].
- 2.13 Others: They are the dead. There is no disease, is there? No cattle are ill.
- 2.14 B'ulay: They are healthy, healthy; they will graze and move. They are all right. The obstacle may be here, this one, the red [pointing to irregular reddish lymphonodi jejunales on the left]. There will be no fighting; this side is all right.
- 2.15 Others: No war, no big trouble. But they may be waiting (...)
- 2.16 Girma: Well, let's wait; we can see the second one later.
- 2.17 B'ulay: The entrails are good. We should look carefully. It's what they say.

Again we see an apparently cryptic dialogue, a commentary jumping from one person to another, without a clear final 'judgement'. B'ulay gives clues, but in an ambiguous manner, presenting possibilities to be followed up by the hearers with the general situation in mind. He does not act as

the authoritative voice, because this voice can only be located in the entrails themselves. By drawing attention to the paths on the one hand and to the domestic settlement on the other, he reflects negative and positive aspects of the situation, but yields nothing specific about place and time, nor about the government attitude, which would force a clear decision on the course of action. However, as a result of this reading, Girma did not go to the government office, but sought refuge in the lowlands (a second reading one hour later had yielded basically the same result). Some months later, it appeared that he had made a sensible decision. The administration gained additional information on his case, sent an intermediary to negotiate with him and clear up matters before reaching a kind of *modus vivendi*. A year later, the government was overthrown, vindicating the cautious attitude taken by Girma who, after the turmoil of the change of regime in Ethiopia in 1991-92, became an important Me'en leader in the region under the new administration.

Entrail-reading as communicative performance

These examples sum up the main types of entrail-reading among the Me'en. Although there are differences of emphasis between them, the similarities in style and communicative procedure are notable. The general communicative advantages of entrail-reading within an egalitarian and non-literate community of people who are strongly dependent upon each other are obvious: people discuss their concerns together, assess them collectively, and any 'authoritative voice' of a person, even if he is a respected elder, is *deflected* towards the neutral medium of entrails, which carries the 'map' of the Me'en land, revealing something of the general condition of the people inhabiting it and dependent on it. No one really doubts the value of the entrails as a useful medium to speak about sensitive personal or community concerns which cannot be expressed in a bold, authoritarian manner (cf. Strecker 1988: 208-9). However, this does not mean that the experts, who not without reason are recognized as such, do not, in some way, 'lead' the process, partly on the basis of their knowledge about the wider context of the case and partly on the basis of their experience.

It was claimed that entrail-reading achieved its communicative purpose by indirectly, or inferentially, but intentionally communicating socially sensitive information, the relevance of which is accessible to and is assimilated by the hearer(s). The role of the expert reader(s) in constructing the statements, or, what might be called with some caution the 'message', is vital here. Hence, seeing (or better, hearing) the readers at work is witnessing the production of an indirect and 'collective' communicative statement. It is, however, not being produced by them as individuals with their own personal goals, but as 'neutral' group members.

The readings by Onyái and B'ulay, as cited above, accords with the main points of the theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson. In both examples, it is obvious that inside knowledge of the social context *and* of the assumptions of the audience about all the *possible* meanings of the signs in the entrails is vital. These are part of the 'cognitive environment' of the participants, and set the cues for the

relevance of what is said. In view of the similarity of the two texts, I will comment mainly on the first example.

In the first example, we see Onyái's reserve in being explicit or in directly prescribing what to read, i.e., how to interpret the entrails. However, one can at various moments note his underlying communicative intention, which is explicitly recognized as such by the others present. His statements 1.1, 1.3, and 1.5 are innocuous, clearing the field: he is focussing on the common setting, mobilizing the background assumptions of the hearers about what entrails can say about life. Referring to the 'road', the 'rain' and 'men', he implies that the entrails are good to read and will be reliable. The hearers recognize the relevance of these manifest pointers and pick up his remarks in 1.4, 1.6, 1.8 and 1.10, making further inferences about what they see, and about what may carry new information. Remark 1.7 is relatively explicit, interpreting a very familiar theme of the entrails in the Me'en country at that time, as we shall see later. In remark 1.9, Onyái seems to draw attention to a positive point (the white spots), but the relevance of the remark lies in what is omitted. He shows his intention to say something else, not manifestly but by implication. This is why it is immediately picked up by the others (1.10), who notice the curious red spot not mentioned by Onyái. Onyái then affirms that there is no black (the usual sign of recent death, or of dying already in progress). However, the red is always ambiguous, especially in combination with such a 'growth', or a lymphonodus, or whatever other irregularity (less so when it is a vein). Onyái's utterance makes it mutually clear that something here is relevant. This accelerates the inferential process: the hearers claim to see here either danger or peace (in remark 1.11, the red as sign of the homestead with the burning fire, the place of the woman preparing food, a metaphor for the peaceful household). This could, as I heard later, also be taken as the sign that no ancestor spirits (*k'aluá*) had any grudge. But the hearers are now aware of the fact that some unknown danger may be lurking in the background. The fact that Onyái's remarks 1.11, 1.13 and 1.15 seem to lower the relevance of 1.10 does not invalidate this. On the contrary, it may even accentuate the anomaly of the red. In 1.13, Onyái eliminates the possibility of another danger having influenced the woman: the magician's curse (*bóllí*). It was known that the household had no serious conflicts with other households, which could have 'commissioned' such a curse through a magician-diviner. The oft-repeated claim that the intestines are 'clear' or 'clean' serves to imply that they should not have contained this red. This claim therefore carries additional relevance. Again, the statements are not demonstrative, i.e., there is no clear final judgement, such as 'The woman will definitely recover', or 'The woman will surely die, there is no hope' (a conclusion which would certainly have been warranted on account of the seriousness of her condition). But Onyái's last utterances 1.17 and 1.19 make it clear that his communicative intention has been manifest. The implication is that there is an anomaly which should be reckoned with. The hearers have already taken up the cue of relevance of 1.9, 1.17 and 1.19. They realize that the outcome need not be positive. Thus, Onyái may be said to have indirectly prepared them psychologically for the final outcome by his subtle, but more or less forced, direction of attention to a critical spot.

In the second example, the central reader also 'hides' himself behind the 'authority' of the entrails. Keeping in mind the explicit purpose of the reading, B'ulay is, however, less ambiguous than Onyái. While he does not force any interpretation, he draws attention to 'critical' spots, e.g. in 2.2, at the end of 2.5 and 2.12 and hints at caution. From 2.14, it is obvious that in the last instance his reading is an open-ended one. B'ulay's reading is set in metaphors of the land: the path, rain, the homesteads, the cattle, the 'fighting' (2.9, 2.12, 2.14). He seems to do this in order to make people consider other details which might bear on the personal decision of Girma to leave his area for the place of the enemy, the government. His references to the road or path in 2.2, 2.7, and 2.12 reflect this. When in 2.17 he urges everyone to 'look carefully', B'ulay also means that the whole picture of the 'map' of the entrails should be considered, not just the small details. The negative rhetorical questions in both examples (1.3, 1.9, 1.15, 2.9, 2.13), focusing hearers' attention to crucial elements of the entrails, further support this.

Both fragments show how the communicative process proceeds through inferences, drawing upon background assumptions of the participants whereby the meaning production is contextual and contingent but nevertheless relevant. There is no unambiguous message in the entrails themselves (no 'code'), but a construction of message or meaning in dialogue. When the reader points to details, deflecting attention from what the others presume is relevant (in utterances 1.4, 1.6, 1.8, 1.10, 1.18 and 2.2, 2.5, 2.14), there is an intended meaning to it. Although it is not demonstrative, its range and implications seem clear enough; that is, the level of relevance of the reader's utterances is recognized by the others. This takes care of the inferences which may be drawn from the dialogue as a whole.

In evaluating the applicability of Sperber and Wilson's theory, set in a cognitive-psychological framework, it is important to note that it does *not* imply an exclusion of the contextual relevance of cultural or social factors: these are often a prerequisite for communication in a certain setting and 'cognitive environment' to succeed. Only Sperber and Wilson do not elaborate this aspect of cultural context – certainly not in a cross-cultural perspective – because they are more concerned with outlining the general theory (cf. also Du Bois 1987: 85-7). It may be argued that for a fuller understanding of entrail-reading, as a particular form of communication, a reference to the interaction between psychological and cultural features is essential, (however, see Sperber 1985 for an elaboration). In communication, speaker and hearer both creatively use and refer to background information, and make associations and allusions relevant in a socio-cultural sphere, constructing them and playing upon them. Sperber and Wilson's theory (1986) allows for the fact that meaning is 'constructed' on the basis of relevance (cf. also Tyler 1978: 384). In this respect, the theory as outlined above could perhaps be wedded to Brown and Levinson's 'politeness theory' (1987) as elaborated in Strecker (1988). Strecker's work directs attention to the *social* conditioning of discourse production, especially symbolization. It emphasizes the role of intentional but veiled 'displacement'²⁰. This process – transferring an element from one context to another, usually on the basis of analogy – is very evident also in entrail-reading; for example, the reference to dark spots in the

entrails as 'men', or to the red lymphonodus near the connecting veins as the 'hearth' (Me'en: *bakut*). Much of entrail-reading could also be analysed as examples of the 'off-record' strategy of discourse (Strecker 1988: 114 sq., also 154).

Still, in the case of entrail-reading, it can be seen that, based on the physical characteristics of the guts, there must be a *limited* range within which the inferences can move. For this, we consider the question of whether there can be a kind of grammar, in the sense of a body of 'rules' which constrain which statements generated in entrail-reading can be meaningful or meaningless.

The structure of the entrails: physical marks and their meaning

In view of the communicative process outlined above, it is of less importance to go into the question of whether cultural constraints influence this process or not. Obviously they do, but in the way of background assumptions, partly shaping the cognitive environment of those who communicate. The definition of the value of physical stimuli like colour and structure of the intestines is, so to speak, part of the description of the 'initial conditions', or the setting, of communication. To be sure, from an ethnographic point of view, they are interesting and should be carefully registered (cf. Peristiany 1951: 193; Thomas 1965: 143-4).

The freedom of interpretation of the signs in the intestines is relatively great. But one might expect certain recurring forms or colours of elements in the entrails to be loaded with predictable meaning. In other words, is there an 'autonomous', physically rooted symbolism in them which would retain its meaning irrespective of exogenous influences?

Colours. For the Me'en, there are some minimal 'rules' for the reading, also evident among other Surmic groups, like the Narim (or 'Longarim') and Didinga (cf. Kronenberg 1972). These have to do with some 'basic' colours: red (in Me'en: *goloñi*), white (*holi*) and black (*koroy*), and occasionally greyish/brown (*gid'angi*) and yellow (*ch'ai*).

White means positive, clean. There are no obstacles, no problems. It rarely happens that intestines are completely 'white'. (This positive symbolism of white is found in many other sub-Saharan African cultures, e.g. among the Ndembu, Turner 1975: 168-9).

Red in Me'en thought is associated with life force; it is the colour of the flow of life and of fertility (cf. also Abbink 1992a). The blood of cows, formerly the mainstay of the Me'en way of life and an important food resource (blood was tapped from the neck vein), is nowadays used in divination killings and for certain purifications. Red also signifies the menstrual blood of women, who are excluded from the household when they have their period, and cannot touch food. Thus, red is both seen as a threatening and life-giving sign. But when combined with or applied to certain *forms* in the entrails (e.g., unusually prominent blood vessels or 'roads'), more often than not it indicates problems: possible illness, threats by unknown (supernatural) forces, danger of death (e.g., as a result of a possible attack or raid of an enemy group).

Black usually indicates something negative, like an 'unsafe road', 'decline in prosperity of the household', or even an 'unfavourable attitude of the ancestors'. It often refers to death: past death, or impending death, unavoidable. Black *spots* usually are taken to be persons. It depends on the place of the spots what they mean. Some spots near the connexion of the stomach and guts refer to the person(s) for whom the animal has been killed. If they are spread out near the big connecting vein (arteria jejunale) in the mucous membrane, they usually refer to raiders, police, militia or soldiers approaching, which was associated with death (see below). If black is located on the ileum, caecum or central lymphonodi, which may stand for the household or the 'lineage', the negative message is clear.

Yellow and *greyish* shades on any part of the entrails are ambiguous, but not as dangerous as red. Depending on the location, they indicate something of the attitude of the ancestor spirits, or emphasize that people should not neglect things such as taking care of the fields, or that they should pay attention to certain affines or *lange* (bond friends). However, few Me'en could tell me out of context what precise value could be attached to these two colours.

Spots and veins. The colours only take on their full meaning when their position in the entrails and their combination with certain structures is considered. This provides the readers with the possibility to 'manipulate' and recombine, to let the hearers draw the most probable inferences.

The big veins (arteriae jejunales) in the entrails are of course the roads of the area. This is usually the first thing that is noticed: is the road good or bad.

Reddish or grey or black spots blocking major veins mean that people will face problems or death, either from enemies or when travelling.

Part of the ileum or caecum is often taken to stand for the homestead of a married man and to reflect the state of affairs there, e.g., through arrangements of red or white or black spots.

Notable lymphonodi near the stomach entrance indicate the situation of persons in the household, or, if the family is polygynous, of the wives of a man.

The mucous membrane is water: streams, rivers, or rain in general. If it is large, very transparent and 'white', this means that more rain is to come.

Minor curled reddish veins, e.g., those tying the membrane with other parts of the intestines, are 'ropes'. If they are all red and end in red knots, it means danger.

If the ileum, caecum or the jejunum are in bad shape (shrivelled or relatively small) it may indicate that there will be a lack of food or even famine.

On the basis of the foregoing, one cannot say that there is a notion of physical signs carrying an entirely fixed meaning: contingency and change in interpretation over time are quite possible. Thus, the question of 'symbolism' of the entrails is of minor importance: the symbolic properties of the colours combined with the form and position of the entrails as a whole do not predict the communicative result. In this respect, the practice of reading is a fairly straightforward communicative exercise, where the symbolic associations and artful placements are less relevant than in a ritual, which is more of a scripted 'drama', a play of social life.

While it is obvious that entrail-reading obeys some basic rules, it would be fairly fruitless to interpret the practice as an instance of a well-structured language where the utterances would have a more or less predictable, translatable meaning. If the colours and form of the entrails had a standardized meaning, there would be no possibility of deducing a communicative intention of a reader, the presence of which I have demonstrated above. We have seen that certain physical traits of the intestines can receive different interpretations, depending not only upon their various combinations but also, in the last instance, upon socio-historical changes within Me'en society and upon the quality of Me'en contacts with the wider society. These affect the assumptions about what they *will see* in the intestines. What the intestines reveal changes over time: they always reflect new problems which the community faces. The main differences in what the Me'en see in the entrails now and what they once saw, as far as can be determined from interviews and scant references, have to do with: a) the changes in mode of production from agro-pastoralism to subsistence agriculture in the last fifty years; b) the decline of the pattern of raiding and counter-raiding; c) their incorporation into the

Ethiopian state, especially after the 1974 revolution; and d) their increased exposure to general highland Ethiopian culture in the same period.

Among the more transhumant pastoral groups, entrail-readings reflect the classical themes: the chances of future raids by the group itself or by neighbours; possible drought, famine, or epidemics; chances of fertility of humans and live-stock, or problems with the government.²¹ Me'en readings in recent years still partly reflect similar concerns – the environment remains capricious and unpredictable – but there is more emphasis on the well-being of individuals, on averting the curse of magicians, and on matters like choosing a good location for the fields, and on the cultivation of crops. They do speak less of the well-being of the cattle herds and of transhumant treks, or of the 'dangers from afar' (raiding). But during the period of fieldwork (1989–90) one specific problem of 'raiding' remained: government patrols which entered the Me'en area to recruit soldiers for the National Army to fight in the civil war in the north (see note 21). This recruitment was always by force, at gun-point, and whenever news of such an impending raid spread, all young Me'en took refuge in the inaccessible lowlands or the forest. Men who went to the Army hardly ever came back. In the previous ten years (up to the downfall of the military regime), this had become an important disruptive factor in Me'en society, both in terms of lost labour power and the break-up of families. Virtually every entrail-reading produced statements about the possible arrival of armed men, often specifying time, area and numbers, who would 'lead away many Me'en in ropes'. This image itself stems from the days of slavery before the second world war, when Me'en were also carried off like this.

Finally, it has been noted that in recent years the collective entrail-reading sessions of the Tishana-Me'en seem to have lost something of their importance, certainly when one compares them with those among the Bodi-Me'en. The Tishana are now more likely to go to the magician-diviners for oracle-like consultations: individual and household concerns are becoming more central, following the general centrifugal tendency in Tishana social organization.

Conclusion

In entrail-readings, both cognitive and functional aspects can always be discerned. Analysis should aim at elucidating their complex relationship in a pragmatic perspective.

I have described entrail-reading as a kind of divination aimed at predicting and achieving more insight in, and thus more potential 'control' over, insecure and precarious conditions of life. (Such points have often been emphasized in anthropological literature on divination, cf. Fortes 1987a: 5, 7.) It is a kind of problem-solving. I have argued that this form of indirect discourse reveals itself as an effective but subtle social tactic, to express and convey personal and community concerns in a veiled, non-direct way. Although acknowledged experts take the lead in interpreting the entrails, they cannot claim any firm authority on the basis of their expertise. Instead, they let the inferential process run its course. Entrail-reading is thus a running commentary on pertinent problems in the community, urging people to take these problems seriously, to be prepared for them and, if necessary, to take redressive action. It sensitizes people to problems of

communal life, urging them to work towards harmony or towards renewing the social contract (in some instances to be taken quite literally) between local groups, affines and 'lineages'.

Hence, we see that entrail-reading features both as a mirror of social and individual life and its wider context, as well as – in the context of assessing the general state of a community or a lineage group in its particular territory – a model upon the basis of which corrective action can be taken. At the same time, entrail-reading statements carry no sanctions whatsoever, and people need not abide by them. They are part of an ongoing 'social debate' about community matters, exploring and constructing the bounds of social praxis.

A closer look at the rhetorical strategy of entrail-reading has shown that it is effective as a communicative performance and proceeds largely along the same lines as many forms of veiled social discourse in any human society (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987: 7–10). It evinces a veiled intentionality which is communicatively recognized and processed by way of implicatures.²² Obviously, such discourse does not have to be 'representational-conceptual' to be effective as communication. The question of whether or not it is nonsensical or non-rational to 'read' arbitrary animal parts in order to make predictions is therefore largely irrelevant, as is the question of whether the practice is emotionally functional.

I conclude with a general remark. The purpose of describing entrail-reading as a cultural practice should not *only* be to arrive at the cultural logic of yet another culture or even at some of the implicit 'operational rules' of cultures like the Me'en.²³ It is also to suggest that, in line with the general task of anthropology, ethnographic examples of lesser known forms of discourse can illuminate the general logic of cultural representations, and the way in which they are constructed and processed in a cross-cultural manner. This leaves scope for the further development of pragmatic theory on the basis of interdisciplinary cognitive studies.

NOTES

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¹ However, I will not elaborate its theoretical implications in detail. One very interesting analysis of certain forms of divination discourse informed by pragmatic theory has been offered by Du Bois (1987).

² As Nugent has noted in his perceptive article on problems of theoretical discourse in anthropology (1988: 93), Sperber and Wilson's work, 'which bears on questions of communicative competence of central concern to symbolic anthropologists, has hardly been recognized'. Not much has changed since this was written.

³ The cognitive environment is defined by Sperber and Wilson (1986: 39) as 'the set of all the facts that [one] can perceive or infer', i.e. facts in the environment that are manifest (perceptible or inferable) to a person.

⁴ Confining our view to this East African region, it should be noted that entrail-reading is not, as one would expect, connected *per se* with a transhumant pastoralist existence: several Omotic-speaking Ethiopian groups like the Aari, the Maale, the Basketto (cf. Jensen 1959) and the

Cushitic-speaking Dullay are sedentary agrarian cultivators, but they also practise it. In fact, the first published extract of an entrail-reading dialogue is probably that of Amborn *et al.* (1980: 129–35) on the Dullay people. Amborn *et al.* present a native text (in the Dobase-Dullay language), its translation, a ‘map’ of the intestines (of a goat) and a short commentary.

⁵ Fieldwork on this group was carried out in 1988 and 1989–90 for about 13 months. Research on the Tishana is part of a comparative project which will also include work on the neighbouring Suri people.

⁶ The last local famine was in 1988, claiming the lives of *c.* 600–800 people.

⁷ In Me’en society, there are, in addition to entrail-readings, other divinatory practices geared to individuals, for instance, the throwing of sandals (cf. Haberland 1959), or the interpretation of the pattern made by water cast on an old cattle skin. The distinction drawn here is analogous to that made by Evans-Pritchard (1956: 272) in his discussion of Nuer sacrifices: sacrifice concerned with social relations and sacrifice concerned with the welfare of the individual.

⁸ Cf. Hubert and Mauss (1964: 97) describing the general ‘procedure’ of the sacrificial rite from a cross-cultural perspective.

In answer to some readers of an earlier version of this article, it has to be noted that a Me’en entrail-reading *cannot* be conceived of as a *sacrifice*. The animal killed is not seen as a ‘gift’ or offering to the ‘occult forces’ (Fortes 1987*a*) which influence the life of mortals. Me’en neither invoke their God (*Tuma*) nor the ancestors at an entrail-reading. They do admit a connexion between ‘lineage-ancestors’ and, for instance, local spirits (*k’olle*) and the entrails, but this is because the attitudes and intentions of those ancestors and spirits can sometimes be guessed at on the basis of an entrail-reading. But no communion or communication is established between the readers and those ‘occult’ forces. The life of the animal is not seen as atoning or substituting for that of a human being. Neither is the animal seen as vicariously suffering for the people who make the sacrifice (cf. Lienhardt 1961: 251). By killing the animal and looking at the intestines, the Me’en basically want to ‘see what’s happening and what, if anything, should be done’. *Tuma* is not involved. This interpretation accords with that of Beattie (1967: 222) on Nyoro haruspication.

⁹ Women do not lead an entrail-reading in this ‘patrilineal’ society, probably because they are not recognized as ‘jural’ authorities in public or formal community matters.

¹⁰ Third-generation descendants of northern immigrants (Amhara, Kaficho, some Tigray, Wollo and Oromo) occupy five villages in the Tishana area. They have retained some of their traditional magico-religious practices from the north. The mainly Orthodox Christian Amhara people have an intricate system of traditional medicine and magic, including divination (see Young 1977), in a form completely different from that of the Me’en. The Amhara and Me’en ‘systems’ of healing do not really mix, but are used alongside each other. In the case described, Amhara divination on behalf of the afflicted woman was never considered.

¹¹ For more terms and technical details, see the excellent textbook by Nickel *et al.* (1960). Apart from the map reproduced here in fig. 1, this book contains a good colour drawing of bovine intestines (1960: 105).

¹² In Me’en: *she’i*. This word is ambiguous: it means: clean, clear, good, well-mannered, or beautiful. In this sentence I take it to mean ‘clear’, in the sense that they reveal their message in a clear fashion. Everywhere in the translation where I write ‘clean’, or ‘clear’ or ‘good’, the speaker used the word *she’i*.

¹³ The ileum and caecum had three shades: white, dark and greyish. If the white field had had obvious dark patches, it would have meant that death was near.

¹⁴ A second reading often follows somewhat later, but it usually yields an interpretation not much different from the first.

¹⁵ Belief in the *k’olle* spirits may have been taken over by Me’en from the Kaficho people, who partly lived in areas now occupied by Me’en (who entered the highland zones at the end of the nineteenth century). It was sometimes said that while the former occupants of the area (also Bench people, a different ethno-linguistic group of sedentary cultivators) may have gone, the local spirits of the land can still be there.

¹⁶ When we compare the Me’en text with the text cited by Amborn *et al.* 1980, which describes a reading of goat’s intestines on behalf of one man and his household (1980: 129), we find that the latter presents more details about the specific *social network* in which the household is embedded than is the case in the Me’en reading. But the style of this Dullay text, although less

lively and less complete, is of an indirect, allusive character rather similar to the Me'en text cited. Amborn *et al.* say that the main reader was giving 'veiled information, which toward the end climaxed in a kind of vision-like general view' (Amborn *et al.* 1980: 129, my translation).

¹⁷ Cf. the statement on entrail-reading by Baldambe, Strecker's Hamar informant (Strecker 1979: 52): 'He, the specialist knows. But if he sees death, people don't like this and say he lies. So he hides the truth from them'.

¹⁸ Like so many African diviners, Onyái was a man of wisdom and high personal character (cf. Peek 1991: 3).

¹⁹ Perhaps better called 'rain-master'. In some respects his role is comparable to that of the Dinka masters of the fishing-spear or the Nuer leopard-skin chiefs.

²⁰ Although in its final chapters Strecker's study mainly talks about how displacement occurs in ritual, I would not consider Me'en entrail-reading a ritual in the sense that their burial-ceremony (cf. Abbink 1992a) or their purification-ceremony after manslaughter or adultery are rituals.

²¹ In May 1991, the Marxist-Socialist government under Mengistu Haile Mariam was toppled by the coalition of northern rebel forces, which took over the central government and ended a civil war that had been raging for several decades.

²² On the basis of his study of divination discourse, Du Bois (1987) has argued that meaningful language use is possible *without* the assumption of intention. But he seems to assume that meaning must always be manifest. A relevance approach along the lines of Sperber and Wilson (1986) makes clear that this is not necessary. The examples of (ritual) divination analyzed by Du Bois are specific in that they all deal with formal, standardized language: the same texts are always related by the diviner at any consultation (Du Bois 1987: 94). Even in these examples, however, Du Bois concentrates almost exclusively on the eventual speaker's intention, while ignoring the listener's communicative intention. But the latter is crucial for the construction of meaning.

²³ This would entail a more integral analysis of all forms of divination in Me'en society, and relating entrail-reading to other aspects of Me'en ritual and world-view. Such an endeavour goes beyond the confines of this article.

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La lecture des entrailles, ou l'analyse des discours divinatoires en Afrique

Résumé

La lecture divinatoire des intestins d'animaux, une pratique culturelle très répandue en Afrique orientale (mais peu discutée en anthropologie) est analysée en termes de stratégies de communication voilées, mais pourtant manifestes, et placées sous la contrainte de prémisses culturelles. L'article, qui repose sur une étude du groupe ethnique me'en au sud-ouest de l'Éthiopie, fait usage de la « théorie de la pertinence » mise en avant par Sperber et Wilson (1986). Autrefois agro-pastoralistes, les Me'en vivent aujourd'hui d'activités d'auto-subsistance (chasse, cueillette, et horticulture). Après avoir décrit deux types de lecture d'entrailles différents, l'auteur montre que ce n'est pas la série de règles sous-jacentes organisant le discours de lecture qui permet de tracer le contour signifiant du message « contenu » dans les entrailles, mais, plutôt, l'ensemble des indices contextuels, tacites et sociaux. En effet, la structure physique des intestins (quelqu'en soient les détails) n'a pas de signification en elle-même, car la signification se construit de façon émergente, dans la lecture. La lecture fonctionne donc comme un événement de communication, ré-activant de manière indirecte les présuppositions de l'« audience » tout en transmettant l'intention de ceux qui interprètent le « message ».

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