

Preprint and unabbreviated version

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The long-term research at the IKGf shows that rituals of prognosis and divination have been practiced in many different cultures and in almost all historical periods, and even play a noticeable role in modernity, where a critical attitude towards divination is prevailing. Rituals of prognosis and divination would not have survived over such a long time and would not be so persistent if they did not fulfill important functions for individuals, communities and societies. What are these functions of prognostic rituals? My project in the consortium deals with ritual aesthetics and social structure. It pursues the general thesis that rituals of prognosis are basically linked to the problem of stability and change in society and in individual life. Prognostic rituals are dealing with challenges and social integration in a symbolic way, and are steering the necessary change of social life.

Let us first take a short look upon a contemporary example. To validate the hypothesis gained by theoretical reflection and literature, I conducted a case study on Tarot, in a group led by a young female artist, practicing tarot as an oracle as well as an art project. I decided to join such an oracle performance for participant observation and later for a narrative interview with the artist-diviner. She has been developing several art projects based on the Tarot, which she staged in performances called "*The Fool's Journey*" including various elements of performing arts, or "*Walking the Tarot*", combining the Tarot oracle with the use of shamanic elements. Her guiding idea is to create a kind of collective oracle during the performance, so everything is well considered before, but the process is open to the audience and "*always a surprise*", as the artist-diviner said in the interview. During the performance, many symbolic actions are taking place, such as symbols for the elements enacted in the ceremony: Fire or Smoke, Earth, Water and Air. These symbolic actions are intended to create the space for the collective oracle and connect this ritual space with a different kind of reality, with the "*spirits*" or "*deities*", as the artist said. For this reason various aesthetic means like visual support from light effects and acoustic elements like drumming are implemented. In our case, after a while of practicing collective

rhythm and walking, a vague impression of trance was in the air, and the oracle process began. The deck of cards (the Great Arcana) was shuffled and two cards for the evening and the following month pulled. At this evening it was “The Death”, accompanied by the card “The Chariot”. In the interview, the artist-diviner said: *“If tarot is a journey then all cards are good, there are no bad or good cards, because they are reflecting all the possibilities.”* Each of the cards creates a new way of perception, and gives another access to the question asked. The oracle *„is playful in methods, but serious in the task“*. In a situation of “chaos”, using aesthetic and symbolic means, the oracle causes a shift in perception and creates a specific symbolic outcome which can then be put into a new frame and give a new insight. Therefore, the participating audience is enabled to leave routinized ways of seeing and acting, which may be not productive in the given social situation: *“The oracle is mirroring the situation in a new way, from a new perspective.”*

So what are the social functions of prognostic rituals for individuals or societies? First of all: Prognostics and divination are creating a necessary capacity for decision and acting in confusing situations. They are attempts to get knowledge about things we cannot know, to reduce contingency about important common or private issues: Will we have good circumstances for political decisions or not, will we have good fortune in family life or in public affairs, will there be conflicts with other countries or not - and so on. The prognostic rituals have to deal with the basic social problem of contingency, including the undetermined future of developments, crises, turning points. The ritual process reduces contingency and, if successful, promotes feelings of trust into social, historical and natural order. In the ritual process, the symbolic order is performed with meaningful patterns such as words, sounds, forms, colors, and this performance is generating an experience of evidence and suggests a way of interpretation. The ritual process is taking place in a way of perception apart from everyday life (see Victor Turner). To start a ritual, there is a need for a shift in perception, for stepping over a threshold. The perception of everyday life is governed by routines, and this is in most cases very functional for both the social process in general and the individuals. But acting in the ritual process is quite similar to acting in arts: Both require to go beyond the routines of perception: A mode of perception is needed, which is described in arts with the term “seeing as seeing” (Max Imdahl). That means a fully awake attention for every special and characteristic part and element of an aesthetic experience, for every tiny echo of a staged music piece or the thousand shades of a word or sentence in a special situation. It is necessary to leave the everyday life mode to shift to a kind of

perception in which the usual borders don't count and things can be appreciated which aren't present in everyday life and couldn't be perceived before. A new perspective on familiar problems can emerge in this way. It is a perception mode, in which profound changes of emotions, of identity and of collective consciousness are possible.

In traditional societies, prognostic rituals connect the diviner and the audience to the cosmological order in order to be able to make reasonable and legitimate decisions. Within a divination process, conditions and possibilities for action would be compared, enriched or transformed with cosmological messages in often multi-stage processes. Not only the circumstances for promising actions are to be recognized, but also ethically correct decisions are to be made. In modern prognostication processes, conditions and possibilities of a situation are analyzed or simulated in order to calculate probabilities and to make reasonable, legitimate, effective and collectively acceptable decisions on that basis. We can see: The goal is thus quite similar in traditional and modern societies, but the methods and procedures are different, and also the knowledge systems behind the process are different. Rituals of prognosis are able to steer the problem of stability and necessary change of a society in accordance with the knowledge and belief system of this society. In addition, political decision-makers and rulers are relieved and supported by prognostic procedures, both in traditional *and* modern societies. Without such prognostic rituals, most societies would probably fall apart, because trust into the future, cohesion and legitimation would fade and anomy increase.

During the prognostic ritual, a non-everyday situation is created in accordance and resonance to cosmological order or - in modern societies - to the knowledge system: A withdrawal of ego, personal interests, power and politics is expected and possible after this shift in perception, giving way to higher forces of any kind. If the process works well, a major part of the responsibility for the future would be taken from the ruler and is now attributed to or legitimized by higher powers. Procedures of prognostics and divination are able to establish collective integration under confusing conditions of action by binding the decision pathways to the collective knowledge system and releasing them from personal interests and power struggles. In the divination process there is always a danger of misuse by the diviner himself who could have a huge symbolic power. However, presumed that the diviner don't encroach the ritual process for his own interests, oracles could be a very helpful instrument to cope with necessary changes. Therefore an oracle is dealing with the problem of contingency in a

confusing situation: It is stabilizing the community and relieving from interest conflicts as well as it is giving new and maybe “higher” perspectives on challenging and unclear situations, according to the cosmology and the shared knowledge system of the community. In some cases, an oracle even might help to correct a wrong or selfish policy of the sovereign.

Generally spoken, divination is dealing with the social or even human problem of contingency in an ambiguous, contradictory or confusing situation. This happens not necessarily through a reliable prediction, often desired but rarely achieved, but through the social functions of the divination process itself. Analyzing social functions of the ritual process may open an interface to comparison and allow for an inductive development of theory on prognosis, which is worth to be studied furtherly.