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ALEX DE WAAL

**DIVINATION AND ORACLES.** There is practically no community in black Africa that does not know divination, an institution attuned to people's basic assumption that the fundamental order of things lies in the invisible, the otherworldly. Divination and its clients see the otherworldly realm as underpinning the this-worldly social-symbolic order and holding the key to the individual's fate, good or bad, here and now. Despite the availability of cosmopolitan technology and biomedicine (which assume that reality is sheer matter, i.e., something constructed and/or indeterminate) to which the well-to-do have ready access, the historical African religions, for their part, as well as widespread Christianity and Islam, underscore most African people's sense of the world as fundamentally reaching out human knowledge and mastery. In the case of a lasting disempowerment or affliction (insoluble conflict, disaster, exceptional loss, lack of income, chronic illness, misfortune, threat of death, or difficult decisions concerning the foundation of a house, marriage, or divorce or migration opportunities), people in uncertainty may call upon a diviner's keen sense of offering new insights into the enmeshed ancestral, societal, ethical determinants of their lives, so as to stir up their existence. Recourse to divination may even be linked to critical political or communitarian decisions, the struggle over scarce economic resources, warfare, and similar conflicts.

The divinatory consultation or oracle works toward identifying remedial or preventive measures to be taken and thereby provides stepping stones for empowerment and a temporality of prospect and peace of mind. Sometimes, however, the diviner's involvement may actually exacerbate the conflict or indeterminate situation. Indeed, a diviner's role may be that of the trickster, namely, one of ambivalent speech or apparent deception, in order better to reveal and address the problem. Public scepticism toward the diviner or power struggles among elders and family factions may detract from the authority or acceptability of an oracle's findings. While diviners reject suggestions that they themselves are sorcerers\*, they tend not to discourage their client's depressive belief in sorcery. That diviners have only occasionally aspired to positions of public leadership also shows the extent to which divination remains beyond political power.

#### KINDS OF DIVINATION AND ORACLES

In black Africa the continuum of geomantic and shamanistic divination implies cross-world communication and knowledge not otherwise attainable. Diviners are perceived as mechanisms of spiritual forces that have been selected for this role at birth or identified through name-giving, through recovery from a particular illness, or by descent relations; many are endowed with a charismatic personality. Through elaborate professional training and initiation, diviners-to-be become members of trans-local cults, sodalities, or lodges. Divination basically concerns a rather stable and culturally relevant body of expert production of etiologically hemiceneutics. Divinatory perception—and here a punctual observation from a psychoanalytic perspective—traces a kernel of forces or fate at the heart of human experience that escapes conventional understanding and other mainstream human control yet is perceptible through its effects.

Divination in Africa is always to some degree mediumnic in that the oracle and the divinatory tools, if not the entranced shamanic diviner him or herself, establish heightened sensorial awareness of, and communication with, what is defined as an otherworldly realm of unforeseeable and invisible forces diagnosed as being coactivated by spirits,

ancestral sanction, sorcery, or spell, determining one's fate. The divinatory oracle utters the message from a beyond preceding the thought out or domesticated. By singling out a sorcerer, a transgression, or an ancestral wrath, the oracle makes the source of the problem both localizable and particular. The oracle thereby helps to name the as yet unclarified ominous dimension in the lived world, and disentangle its destabilizing effect in the client's subjectivity of introjected, self-ensorceling ~~anger~~ and destructive desires. Divination senses out the subject's and group's inner fields of unruly, unnameable, and undomesticated forces, drives, impulses, sensations, wants and imaginaries and relocates the client in these fields at a point sheltering him or her in sheer possibilities he or she can tap again from so as to intersubjectively reengage in the struggle for a better life.

It could be argued that the effect of the consultation (due to the divinatory techniques and overall ambiance) comes out of the client's unnoticed switching from active and controlled sensorialist rationality seeking tangible evidence for his or her condition and future, on the one hand, to an unfocused, uncensored and somehow unprecedented openness or receptivity to new insights. Such disposition may inspire a new relation to oneself and others, as well as life-changing decisions. This turnover is perhaps all the more effective if the mind is in a humble and unfocused disposition and when the censorship of sensorialist rationality is turned off, like in dream, in an introspective mood induced by the oracle or the charitable distribution of ritual offerings (as recommended by the diviner of Islamic tradition).

Divinatory apparatus and practices appear to be common over very large areas. Shamanic divination operates via mediumship and dream and with the aid of divinatory vehicles such as the divining shrine, whereas geomantic divination deploys a basket, tray, ladle, or cup, enticing a set of icons or moves whose configurations are to be decoded: a grid of cowry shells, marked tablets, or some other figure, these being icons of the articulation points of society and life. While manipulating the divinatory vehicles, and/or reciting the verses or questions suggested by the oracular grid, diviners apply, in strictly prescribed ways, an interpretational strategy appropriate to the local worldview,

symbolic references, and social organization. The grid enables the diviner to work through a set of questions, or lends meaning to the visionary information or the configurations of the divinatory vehicles, in an interplay of past with present and of bodily, social, and cosmological fields (health, human dispositions, the client's web of social relations, the predicaments of a postcolonial globalizing world, sorcery, or relations with the deceased, ancestors, or spirits). In some traditions, as among the Nyole of eastern Uganda, a dialogue between diviner and client creates a socially acceptable and ordered interpretation of seemingly chaotic divinatory messages. The diviner's decoding of these messages is compared to the actions of an animal making an imprint, the ideogram formed by the nerve pattern on the underside of a leaf or the shell of a groundnut or other leguminous plant, or to weaving.

John Pemberton III and Wim Van Binsbergen offer in-depth interregional and historical comparative studies of divination. A shift in interpretation in the 1990s led to new perceptions of divination as a hermeneutics, a mode of world-making, or a process of regeneration, whereas former approaches had been stymied by the modernist and positivist preoccupation with whether divination provides valid knowledge of reality in the form of factual propositions. Several authors have classified most of the African divination forms as either geomantic or rather shamanic. The particular space-time set-up that is involved in cultivation, pastoralism, external (long-distance) trade, and/or in conquest and political centralization, especially when going hand in hand with Arabic literacy and geometry, has favored the spread of *geomantic* divination. Van Binsbergen demonstrates how much the latter is an offshoot of the millennia-old civilizations of the ancient Near East, cross-fertilized by ancient developments of science in the Indus valley and ancient China, and sophisticated by a later offshoot from the same stem: the Islamic civilization. He traces how Arabic geomantic science—an early example of globalization—became a central feature of Islamic high civilization, extending even beyond Islam both along the Indian Ocean and the coasts of Byzantium, to the Latin West, and across most of Africa and Madagascar, and via the trans-Atlantic slave trade, around the Caribbean and on the Latin American west coast.

Most widespread geomantic techniques attested in various parts of the African continent since the sixteenth century are the cowrie-shell and dream divination (in Islamic West Africa), the *Bilumbu*, *Fa*, *Hakata*, *Hamba*, *Ifa*, *Sikidy* and so many akin forms of divination (respectively along Luba, Fon, Shona, Chokwe, Yoruba, or Malagasy cultural traditions), or the *sangoma* tablet divination in southern Africa, as well as the *mankala* board games. In cowrie-shell and tablet divination, the seemingly at random, divinatory-borne manipulation of divinatory tools or tokens over a geometric layout of lines or holes may act as an oracular grid inducing the divinatory analysis. In many *mankala* board games, the mechanical, chess-like, gaming rules may do without reference to otherworldly realm. Tablet divination turns distant time and space (or the elsewhere and otherwise) into a geometry of here and now co-occurring or intersecting paths of causes or antecedents and effects.

While the natural sciences and usual mathematics would conclude that the results of cowrie-shell, tablet, and Mankala geomantic techniques are determined by chance, local actors consider them to be activated and guided by invisible forces. The diviner establishes the divinatory theme according to information a client reveals concerning his or her needs or motivation for the consultation. The diviner then decodes the position or movement of an array of divinatory vehicles, and further interprets the social relevance in dialogue with the client. These divinatory vehicles are manipulated in front of the client while standardized verses or questions about causes, relationships, and events are uttered, depending on the configuration of objects. The ostensibly neutral quality of the divinatory vehicles permits the diviner to deny personal involvement in the social and otherworldly forces at stake. Elsewhere, the client may be the interpreter, as in *Ifa* divination among the Yoruba of Nigeria, whereas the *Sissala* client in northern Ghana is expected to examine personally the divinatory apparatus while being asked a series of yes/no questions. Among the Chagga-speaking people of Kilimanjaro, the perspicacious tuning in of the divinatory objects and the everyday activity of dwelling around production and reproduction, with the client's subjectivity and affliction, both allows for and results from an

unprecedented "seeing through" at the heart of neighborhood relationality.

Scholars have distinguished three types of shamanic divination depending on whether it is produced by possession trance, by strict-shamanic trance, or by a trance-like or heightened state of consciousness. The first category is widespread and involves spirit appropriation of the diviner, who relays or even acts out the message sent by the possessing spirit or deity. Spirit mediums may be associated with a shrine of an interregional cult, such as Ngombo (spread across the Congo-Lunda belt in the southwest of the Democratic Republic of Congo, southeast Angola, and northwest Zambia) or Mwali in southeast Africa. In the second category, the shamanic diviner is believed to initiate visionary contact with the spirit. He or she either recounts this visionary journey or transduces the actions of the spirit in his or her body through a particular alteration in his or her sensorial capacities.

It could be argued that this type of divination is being reappropriated in multiethnic (peri-) urban cultures throughout Africa by many of the Christian healing churches and new Christian-borne movements of the Holy Spirit. While speaking in the name of the Holy Spirit, Christian diviner-prophets surreptitiously coalesce this Christian entity with the ancestral spirits (though often overtly diabolized) summoned to participate in the healing process of the most afflicted church members. The shifting power of the Holy Spirit-Ancestor is all the more effective by virtue of its encompassing capacity to animate, re-energize and recapture life forces. That the divining art of these prophets tends to slide into moral prophecy focussing on individual strivings demonstrates the extent to which the perception and explanation of misfortune and divinatory practice increasingly reflect a spirit of entrepreneurship that is spurred by the multiethnic and commoditized urban context. The third type of divination is distinct in that diviners or seers here develop heightened sensorial or dreamlike visionary capacities.

There are yet other self-arbitrating forms of guilt divination or ordeal. The ordeal extends the shamanic divination into a self-arbitrating proof of guilt. One subcategory involves the diviner's coercion of an invisible force to configure items in

tablet or basket divination or provoke friction or other movement among the divinatory apparatus (rubbing horn, cowry shells, board, or stick; divining cords, listening or detective horn, rattle, axe handle, bones, gourd of medicine, roots, nut shells, coins, etc.) or the reactions of a poisoned fowl to the diviner's yes/no questions. Omens and forms of hunt intended to interrogate the spirits or recently deceased relatives constitute another subcategory.

#### NATURE AND JURAL ASPECTS OF THE DIVINATORY PROCESS

A subtle transaction between diviner, spirits, divinatory vehicles, and clients produces a picture throwing a particular but unforeseeable light on the client's identity and social network, making possible an authoritative rereading and intervention in the problem at hand. Though most divinatory traditions operate at the margins of the local political power structure, some clearly serve to support high political office or regulate power relations between families.

Geomantic and shamanic divination are more of a birthing process than an arbitration; a hermeneutics of disorder more than a discourse of truth; and an art of counselling rather than a factual, causal, or ethical inquiry. Unlike the judicial council, shamanic and geomantic divination is not an exercise of redressive power or domination. Divinatory revelation stands to the jural council of elders as dreamwork to representational and discursive argument, as "speaking from the heart" or "from the womb" stands to the rhetorical reassertion of power relations in the masculine order of seniority.

The diviner disavows authorship of vision and judgment and asserts that whatever message he or she may be voicing stems from the divinatory forces at work in him or her, or in the divinatory media. The diviner is a medium who simply transmits or utters the divinatory message. In some cases the diviner is not even conscious of what he or she is saying and requires an assistant to translate his or her esoteric discourse for the client; under these conditions the divinatory seance is without dialogue. In the Lobi area of southeastern Burkina Faso, the diviner's spirit has no tongue but communicates through hand gestures.

#### SOCIAL CONTEXT

A critical distinction must be made between the oracle proper and the social use of it, namely the instance of divination and the subsequent interpretation, in a family council, of the divinatory assertions. Diviners are expected not only to justify their claims by offering criteria substantiating both their skills and the source of their knowledge but also to demonstrate their impartiality. Divination entails the basic assumption that human relations can be at the origin of affliction. Divinatory aetiologies consider misfortune as the consequence of a tear in the social fabric. The diviner's verdict offers a possible grid for how to reweave the damaged strands in the agnatic, uterine, and matrimonial weave of social reciprocity and reintroduce clients into an order of discourse and exchange. In other words, the oracle achieves its aims through the foundational discourse that the diviner and the clients exercise publicly in the fashion laid down by tradition.

The oracle's ultimate purpose is the transformation of disarray into the order of exchange that forms the basis of meaningful-being-in-the world. The divinatory encounter and consultation enhance the client's openness to the outside world and the invisible realm, and contributes to the innovative shaping of the condition of the subject in the contemporary, postcolonial life-world. The divinatory oracle relativizes its own aetiology, leaving room for individual freedom and genuine initiative in the moral space. Insofar as it establishes multiple links between the misfortune and various social and axiological (cosmological) registers of meaning (the social organization, the rule of exchange, offences, curses, persecutions, spirits), the oracle domesticates impending doom and an inauspicious destiny.

Most divination witnesses to a postcolonial, open-minded intercultural encounter and science-sharing between and across North and South in the twenty-first century's processes of globalization and economic marginalization. Van Binsbergen, a Dutch professor of intercultural philosophy at Erasmus University Rotterdam and director of research at the Africa Study Center in Leiden, describes his becoming a *sangoma* diviner in Francistown (Botswana). Since his initiation he has practiced tablet divination in southern Africa and in the Netherlands, where he devised a computer program for *sangoma* consultation with him

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worldwide by Internet. Numerous African diviners or diviners initiated in an African divinatory art, at work in the North with clients from many African and non-African cultural horizons, invite one most forcefully to rethink, in and from a variety of divinatory knowledge productions and ways of subject formation, one's by definition limited and biasing modes of understanding reality and representation, meaning and agency, culture and power, as well as place and time or locality and belonging.

See also **Death, Mourning, and Ancestors; Religion and Ritual; Symbols and Symbolism.**

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RENE DEVISCH

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**DIVORCE**. See **Marriage Systems**.

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**DJEBAR, ASSIA** (1936-). Assia Djebaris the pen name of Fatima-Zohra Imalayen, Algeria's foremost female writer. Of Berber ancestry, she was born near Algiers and benefited from advanced education because her father was a school teacher. In 1954 she went to Paris to study; the next year she became the first North African woman to be admitted to the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure de Sèvres. But in 1956 she took to the streets of Paris with other students to demonstrate solidarity with Algeria's struggle for independence (1954-1962). Instead of taking her final exams, she produced her first novel, *La soif* (Thirst, 1957). Sought by the French police, she and her husband escaped to newly independent Tunisia in 1958, where she continued to write and work as a political activist. From Tunis she went to Rabat in 1959 to work with Algerian refugees in Morocco; there she obtained a teaching post at the national university.

Out of her Moroccan period came a collection of poems, a play, and a third novel, *Enfants du nouveau monde* (*Children of the New World*), published in Paris in 1962 and translated into English in 2005. Since 1957 she has produced more than twenty literary and artistic works—fiction, essays, film scripts, and poetry. Her works often portray women's political coming of age in colonial, wartime, and