Divination as a spiritual phenomenon has had very little written about it, perhaps due in part to the ready labeling of it as a form of magic and therefore irrational, utilitarian, egoistic, and insufficiently "religious." There has also been a tendency to suppose that the complexity of divinatory ritual, as it is disclosed to the Western observer in localized societies, is merely for outward effect—"mumbo jumbo" added by the diviner for heightened impact on clients. Western indifference to or ignorance of esoteric realms of localized cultures has also, of course, had other causes. But it has in sum badly distorted our understanding of divination, which as I shall argue below is one of the most significant spiritual forms in localized religions.

In the following pages, in addition to characterizing the basic

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1 "Localized" is here used as a substitute for "primitive," "native," "tribal" (or "savage"!), etc., since all these terms have about them a bad odor—a pejorative or incorrect connotation. In a previous article I suggested the terms "highly localized" in this connection, but even this is not quite fair: many localized societies, like those in West Africa that this essay discusses, have extensive intercultural links. See "On the Nature of the Demonic: African Witchery," *Numen* 18, no. 3 (December 1971): 222, n. 30. "Localized" should not be opposed as a term to "universalistic," since localized religions disclose the reality of the universal human condition, while such religions as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and so on are to varying degrees exclusive and insistent that only those accepting their cosmology and soteriology participate in the "real." That is, all religions establish boundaries and structures through which they approach the divine, and in this they are alike. In intentionality, localized religions are often as universalistic and inclusive of all humanity as any of the religions of very differentiated societies.
History of Religions

“types” of divination and their intentionalities as clearly as possible, I would like to discuss their implications for the concepts of personhood and Self, order and disorder, will, rationality and passion, and above all the view of Deity and the Real. African forms of divination, and especially West African, shall be at the fore of our inquiry; but I believe that the patterns discovered there have a wider applicability.

TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGY OF DIVINATION

African forms of divination may be grouped into two polar categories, which we may call “possession” and “wisdom” types, with perhaps a third form, intermediary or prior to the other two, which is “intuitive.”

“Possession” divination is often characterized by the use of oracular mediums, the reading of omens, and the movements of sacred animals or objects. These techniques are especially associated with folk religion and are even commonly found as the dominant form of divination in Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Western folk religions. The key trait of all varieties of divination in this category is not so much the experience of possession as the indigenous theory of possession. The flight of omen birds, for example, which was so important for the divination of Borneo and

2 Recent study of possession per se has proven the primacy of native theories in shaping the understanding of the experience itself. In a fascinating study, Arnold M. Ludwig has shown that the basic symptoms and forms of “altered states of consciousness” can vary and be culturally interpreted as being anything from driving hypnosis to prophetic inspiration; that is, fundamentally similar nerve states are differently experienced and even modified by particular situations and by personal and cultural vision. See his “Altered States of Consciousness,” in Trance and Possession States, ed. Raymond Prince, Proceedings of the 2d Annual Conference, R. M. Bucke Memorial Society, March 4–6, 1966 (Montreal: R. M. Bucke Memorial Society, 1968). Somewhat earlier, Erika Bourguignon had already pointed out that spirit possession is, for Haitians at least, a learned form of behavior: “Children play at spirit-possession and are encouraged in doing so by their elders . . . [one girl at play was noticed] developing a pattern of activities and alternative identities. Impersonating the loa (spirit), she learned to speak of herself in the third person and was encouraged in this and in criticism of her own (waking) behaviour; in this she attempted to dissociate her identity as the deity from her identity as a little girl.” See Erika Bourguignon, “The Self, the Behavioral Environment, and the Theory of Spirit Possession,” in Context and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology, ed. Melford E. Spiro (New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 48–49. Later on, in her “Introduction” to Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change, ed. E. Bourguignon (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1973), she extended these insights to the conclusion that meanings assigned to ecstatic experience can shape these experiences into radically different forms and can also include in these forms experiences we might not term “ecstatic” at all. We can never ignore meaning when we deal with human beings, even on the physiological and perceptual levels. It is an independent variable in all aspects of culture.
Divination and Deity in Africa

of ancient Greece and Rome, was understood to be controlled by the celestial High God or by atmospheric spirits. In the same way, the consciousness and will of mediums are displaced by the divine imperative. But whatever agent is chosen by the divine is already liminal, hierophantic, or in some way paradigmatic. Birds are heavenly creatures; even in youth mediums are strange or even antisocial in behavior, or members of a family or group “set apart,” or stricken with liminal sickness due to a violation of sacred norms. In possession divination, divine or semidivine agents are used as heightened symbolic mediums within a universe filled with hieroglyphic events and objects. By embodying in themselves the energies controlling or working in the present, the divinatory agents disclose a direction to events. This form of divination implies the presence of gods and spirits—agents of the divine that indirectly communicate the decree of the Ultimate. A hierarchy of powers is suggested, in which this lower world of humanity can only humbly receive the decree of Deity through intermediaries and agents whose own wills must first be temporarily annihilated. The arbitrariness of the spirit or god that possesses an agent to express its autocratic will is often accepted without question and without protest.

Very different is “wisdom” divination. In it the spirits, the gods, and human personality as well are all subordinated to a profounder cosmic order. One seeks a dispassionate distance from all things, a spiritual objectivity, which transcends the whole in reducing all perceptual reality to impersonal elemental components. Sensory reality is dissolved into a deeper classification. This form of wisdom, in attempting a rational cataloging of all the possible influences at work in the divine order, often ends by anchoring itself in a Supreme Being or ultimate reality which overarches and orders local forces and particular events. There is a disinclination, therefore, for such transports as possession divination is characterized by. The impersonality and dispassionateness of this type of div-

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History of Religions

ination marks it off from those that depend on gods or spirits possessing mediums or omen animals. An underlying assumption of wisdom divination is that the forces ordering events are not whimsical or personally willful, as might be the case with gods or spirits, but that they express a plan, a law of the universe governing all persons, with its root in transcendent Divinity. The impetus is not different from that animating early Western science, or that directing Enlightenment philosophers in their contempt for religious "enthusiasm."4

Of course, as is true of all sublunar phenomena, there are ambiguous or intermediate forms of divination. Not all possession-type divination refers to gods and spirits, and not all wisdom is anchored in a unitary ground of being, or a Supreme Being. Counterinstances instruct us that we can only talk of tendencies, or structural types, which may vary historically. A striking instance from within Africa is the Mwari cult of the Matopo Hills of Rhodesia, in which the common folk belief, at least, was that Mwari, God himself, spoke from certain caves. The voice, however, as the priests knew, came from certain mediums possessed by Mwari and located deep in the caves; sages interpreted for the petitioners the Word of God in accordance with their wisdom; the structures here are remarkably like those at Delphi and Dodona in Greek antiquity.5 The widespread East and Central African category of prophecy also represents a distinctive subtype—a possession directly by the Supreme Being, whose instructions are

4 The inspiration for all these attitudes was finally religious in nature. Frances Yates has made this very clear for the Renaissance scientists in Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). The universe was the weaving of elementary "syllables" in a literally Kabballistic, mathematical fashion. The same attitude informed the outlook of one of the founders of the scientific method, Sir Francis Bacon. The nineteenth-century English logician John Venn described Bacon's approach as a "mathematical view of the universe, in its extremest form. . . . We find the universe all broken up, partitioned, and duly labeled in every direction; so that, enormously great as is the possible number of combinations which these elements can produce, they are nevertheless finite in number, and will therefore yield up their secrets to plodding patience when it is supplied with proper rules." As Martin Gardner, who quotes Venn's remarks, goes on to say, "Science, to pursue the metaphor, is one stupendous task of cryptanalysis" ("Mathematical Games," Scientific American 227, no. 5 [November 1972]: 118). We would add, a cryptanalysis oriented to prediction—a divination, in short.

5 See Herbert William Parke, Oracles of Zeus (London: Basil Blackwell, 1966), and his The Delphic Oracle, 2 vols. (London: Basil Blackwell, 1956), for the most detailed studies of the subject. There are many descriptions of the Mwari cult, especially in books dealing with the Shona and Venda peoples of the region, and in articles in such journals as NADA (Native Affairs Department Annual) of Rhodesia; but the most recent and best study is M. L. Daneel, The God of the Matopo Hills: An Essay on the Mwari Cult in Rhodesia (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1970).
Divination and Deity in Africa

directly comprehensible and are not further mediated by sage-priests.6

Occasionally there may be encountered in Central and Southern Africa an extraordinary form of divination, neither fully "possession" nor "wisdom" in type, which perhaps should be characterized as a third form—"insight" or "intuitive" divination. It does, however, share essential attributes of both possession and wisdom divinations, and a closer analysis shows it to have a structure which can be interpreted culturally in either way. It is tempting to claim for this apparently more elementary form of divination a deeper antiquity than the other two forms, or even to see it as the source of the others, but we can only confirm that its priority is typological, not necessarily historical. In insight divination, the specialists claim the ability to determine intuitively, and without explicit "possession" or the application of esoteric sciences, the identity and problems of the clients who come to them, and in the same heightened, spiritually alert state, to discover the cause of the troubles. Often they achieve great fame for their ability to locate lost articles or to "find" thieves and witches. A common preliminary test of such a diviner by a prospective client is the demand that he relate details of the frequently arduous journey that the client just completed, which would seem quite impossible for him to know. Some of these specialists proceed by asking questions or making statements to which the client must indicate either brief assent or dissent; the skepticism of clients precludes this from becoming an obvious guessing game. The often remarkable penetration of the diviners seems due to a heightened consciousness that perceives and integrates small clues in their environment, ranging from nonverbal reactions of clients to their

6 Especially in light of the complicated cultural history of East Africa, it appears likely that a Jewish and/or Muslim influence is evident here, in some cases at least. An ancient Jewish presence in the area has been suggested by many scholars to explain the unusual culture of the Lemba or Remba people of Rhodesia and South Africa. Much further north, the Nilotic peoples, with their often strong monotheism, sometimes hint at such influences, though the pervasiveness of High God beliefs in African cultures shows that this, certainly, is indigenous. How such a background, however, might encourage the ready assimilation of Judaic spirituality is evidenced, for example, by the Meru of Kenya. In B. Bernardi, The Mugu: A Failing Prophet (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), we discover that the model for the prophetic figures among the Meru was the Meru culture hero, the first Mugu, who led the Meru out of bondage across "the Red Sea," which parted for them, who had a magic staff, gave the Meru seven commandments from God, and guided them to their promised land; the Meru also have a Garden of Eden story complete with forbidden fruit, the snake, the Fall, etc. See ibid., pp. 52–54, 56–58, 126, 136, 140, etc. Exodus and wondrous river-crossing themes are common in East African myths, in fact. No specifically Christian or Muslim symbolisms are evident in Meru religion.
History of Religions

responses to questions, and, it may be, perhaps also including an awareness that we might call extrasensory. These diviners are often reported to be highly intelligent and to have a thorough knowledge of social interactions and human character. It can be readily understood how easy it would be for this sort of divination to pass over to the elaborately structured classification schemes characteristic of wisdom divination, or how, on the other hand, it might extrapolate from the heightened state of consciousness necessary to this mantic activity to a theory of possession.7

7 The Shona of Rhodesia, who participate in the Mwari cult mentioned earlier, also know of insight divination. According to Michael Gelfand, the Shona recognize two kinds of diviners—the nganga and the mushoberi or hombahomba; see his Shona Religion, with Special Reference to the Makorekore (Cape Town: Juta & Co., 1962), pp. 106 ff. The nganga uses hakata dice (a popularized form of wisdom divination: the dice symbolize all the stages of life of both sexes, and all social roles) or is possessed by shave spirits, while the hombahomba are more intuitive and are regarded as the best diviners. They are so spiritually endowed that it is said that they can spontaneously tell the names of strangers who come to them for advice. But they also use hakata dice. Gelfand describes one remarkable session in which dice were thrown: "He casts them twice and then becomes possessed [sic]. He starts by telling the delegation from where they have come, the name of the deceased, and what kind of person he was. Then he proceeds to relate the cause of death" (ibid., p. 110). Here we have both "wisdom" and "possession" techniques used to produce "insight"; it is not uncommon to find such mixtures of divination practice. Vivid descriptions of insight divination can be found in Rev. Henry Callaway, The Religious System of the Amazulu: Izinyanga Zokubula, or Divination as Existing among the Amazulu, in Their Own Words (London: Trubner & Co., 1884). The Zulu apparently explain insight divining as due to possession by ancestral spirits, to judge from Rev. Callaway. However, a Zulu diviner quoted by M. Kohler, The Izangoma Diviners (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1941), pp. 28, 60, affirms that for him there are three basic types of divination: by the spirits (timilózi—i.e., "possession"), by the use of "bones" classifying reality (i.e., "wisdom"), and divination of "the head," in which the diverin intuits the answer while conversing with the clients (i.e., "insight"). Such confirmation of a phenomenological description is very encouraging. J. R. Crawford's tripartite classification of divination among the Rotse of Zambia also has some resemblance to our own, though it is not the same (see his Witchcraft and Sorcery in Rhodesia [London: Oxford University Press, 1967], pp. 179 ff.). Support, however, for a phenomenology which distinguishes only two fundamental forms of divination can be found in G. van der Leeuw, Religion in Essence and Manifestation, trans. J. E. Turner (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 2:379, for whom divination "at one time has a calm and almost scientific character and at another a more ecstatic form..." Van der Leeuw cites Plato as the source of this distinction between the "ionistic" and "mantic" phases of divination (Phaedrus 244: a similar citation was made in van der Leeuw, 1:225). Plato's Timaeus 72 could also have been added. Essentially repeating these distinctions in their categories of "inductive" and "intuitive" divination, with an unconvincing third type, "interpretative," thrown in, are André Caquot and Marcel Leibovici, eds., La divination, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968) (unfortunately unavailable to me until after completion of this essay, but certainly the best extensive survey of the material done in recent decades), and George K[err] P[ark] in Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th ed., s. v. "Divination." These typologies agree in emphasizing the emotional state of the diviner; however, they ignore the indigenous theory of divination, which is what we are stressing here. For a rationale for this more phenomenological approach, see especially n. 2. above.

163
Divination and Deity in Africa

Liminality and Social Structure in Divination

When we survey the African instances, it becomes evident that the form of divination most common in folk usage is the possession or agent type (in which omen animals, divinatory instruments, or mediums are possessed by a demigod or spirit and are involuntarily agents of a higher will), while knowledge of deeper levels, and a more inclusive classification of phenomena, is usually reserved for an elite who tend to the wisdom form and to a divinatory cult to the Supreme Being, beyond the gods and spirits.

The mysterious Mwari shrines in the Matopo Hills, for example, are too awesome to be consulted by ordinary folk having ordinary questions; their ancestors and local spirits, speaking through local mediums and omens, suffice for most affairs. In a similar fashion, the Aro Chuku shrine of the Igbo of Nigeria exercised nominal and sometimes actual political power over most of the Igbo, including lesser oracular shrines, partly due to its accepted supremacy in a religious hierarchy: Chuku (God) spoke through the Aro Chuku shrine, while lesser agents of Chuku spoke through mediums at other shrines. The deeper wisdom and primordiality claimed by Aro Chuku priests has recently been supported by the discovery there of a sacred script, or hieroglyphics, preserved by the priests perhaps from the late second millenium B.C., when it was possibly conveyed to them by Cretan traders. The Lugbara of Uganda/Zaire believe, too, that the greatest diviners are inspired by God (Adro) directly, while lesser, merely locally known diviners more vulnerable to error are indwelt by the Adroanzi, the “children of God,” who include the ghostly dead.

Varieties of possession divination, including mediums and such agents as chickens, are very common in Central and Southern Africa; ancestral and local spirits communicate their will in this way to their kin groups and village inhabitants. But there also exists an “international” divination system having great similarities from Zaire and Angola to South Africa, and those who have mastered it have high prestige in their societies. It is a form of wisdom in which reality is broken down into as many as 205 elements, each of which is represented by a bone, a piece of wood, or


other object in a winnowing basket. To answer a query, the contents of the basket are shaken (after the proper invocations) and the pattern of symbols at the top of the basket is analyzed. The possible number of interrelationships between 200, or more commonly 100, symbols is obviously enormous, and the training in the use of the basket and its bones is long and arduous, often involving travel to study at the feet of famous sages from other tribes. Among the Ngombe of Zambia it is said that a novice diviner must first kill a near relative before the basket will divine properly; everywhere it is agreed that the sacrifice of some form of life, usually a chicken, is needed for the bones to become animated. But the life that then fills the bones is integrated into a universal classification, one that embraces the entire cosmos, and which some diviners speak of as the "Word" of God.\(^{10}\) It has been remarked of basket divination in the context of one culture:

The art is so perfect that bone-throwers can find any amount of satisfaction in practising it. Consider that, in fact, all the elements of Native life are represented by the objects contained in the basket of the divinatory bones. It is a résumé of all their social order, of all their institutions, and the bones, when they fall, provide them with instantaneous photographs of all that can happen to them. This system is so elaborate that I do not hesitate to say that, together with their folklore, their lobola customs, and their burial rites, it is the most intelligent product of their psychic life.\(^{11}\)

Victor Turner has written that its practice is, in effect, a "cybernetic" system into which the specificities of social interaction in a particular village and kin group are fed, together with the precise problem (sickness, barrenness, etc.), and an answer attuned to the anxieties and cognitive-emotional realities of the clients produced. A true healing is very often the result.\(^{12}\)

We have found in the instances discussed a suggestive correlation between spiritual hierarchies and social hierarchies and

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\(^{10}\) Most detailed studies of particular cultures in this vast area mention "basket divination"; for an overview, see Barrie Reynolds, *Magic, Divination, and Witchcraft among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia*, Robin Series, vol. 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 100–101, and the detailed treatment in Victor Turner, *Ndembu Divination: Its Symbolism and Techniques*, Rhodes-Livingston Paper no. 31 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961). The Thonga of South Africa have a clearly indigenous concept of the "Word" conveyed by the divinatory bones; see Rev. Henri Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan Co., 1927), 2:385, 541, 570; on the last-cited page we read: "But the Bula, the Word, is not generally looked on as being the utterance of the ancestor-gods. The bones are, in a certain sense, *superior to the gods* whose intentions they disclose. The *Bula* is the revelation of a more or less impersonal power, independent of the gods" (italics his). The diviners appeal directly to Tilo, the "Impersonal" High God (ibid., pp. 429–31).

\(^{11}\) Junod, p. 521.

\(^{12}\) Turner, p. 18.
Divination and Deity in Africa

practices; the more elite forms of divination tend toward the conscious learning of "wisdom," while folk practice centers more on a "possession" or "agent" theory of divination, which, despite a lesser prestige or accuracy, is controlled by spirits and demigods nearer to the earthly existence of social groups. In a phenomenological sense, this social structuring of divination types has a remarkable similarity to another pattern also widely found in African cultures. That is the tendency to associate greater wisdom, and deeper access to reality and to the Supreme Being, with diviners located farther away from the local village, while local diviners tend more to be mediums to regional spirits, of a lower level, more immersed in the merely human condition and subject to kin ancestors and demigods. These merely local mediums receive less respect and are less feared. They are often less fenced about with prohibitions, may work in daily life intimately with their neighbors, and generally have no special dress. On the other hand, the greatest authority is given to diviners who have traveled into far-off cultures to learn wisdom; unlike local oracles, these practitioners make use of complex methods requiring long training. Theirs is an international science. These specialists may well be an important vehicle for cultural contact and innovation, though their role in cultural change has been generally ignored.


14 However, Robin Horton has stressed the role of traditional diviners and religious leaders in explaining how so many Nigerians have been able to convert from cults to local spirits and demigods, to the aladura (prayer) religious movements (these are indigenous Christian movements that reject Western religious institutions); see his "African Conversion," Africa 41, no. 2 (April 1971): 104. Diviners, who have a traditionally close link to the Supreme Being and lead in the attempt to integrate novelty to the past, turn the people to the Supreme Being especially in times of crisis when lesser spirits cannot handle the cosmic dislocation. In the moral-social upheaval of colonialism, they guided the people to a renewed devotion to the ("Christian") High God, ordering the destruction of shrines to lesser spirits. John Middleton has shown the same kind of dynamic in religious change among an East African people, in which prophets of the High God played central roles; see his "Prophets and Rainmakers: The Agents of Social Change..."
History of Religions

But the profounder motivation of their quest for wisdom is to discover the deeper levels of existence and to articulate these levels in a systematic unification of understanding. For this very reason their wisdom is often esoteric and multilayered, and has an initiatic structure.\footnote{A striking instance is the Dogon of Mali, whose inner world has slowly been revealed to us by the researches of Marcel Griaule and his assistants. In their early publications, they presented as the creation myth of these agriculturalists a tale in which God (Amma) withdrew to heaven after a Muslim failed to serve him a cup of water. See Germaine Dieterlen, \textit{Les âmes des Dogon}, Travaux et mémoires 40 (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie, 1941), p. 240. In 1948, however, an astonishing series of interviews with a blind sage disclosed an esoteric cosmogony centering on a marriage of heaven and earth and a theft of grains and culture from heaven. A later article revealed that the creation myth had yet a deeper level, in which all is said to have come from a cosmic egg or seed. Finally, in a summation which shall reach several volumes, we find that the oldest Dogon initiates and diviners know that in the beginning was the Word, which was the image of God, and from whose vibrations the whole universe is modeled and sustained. These sages have even developed a kind of script, known only to them, to express the unfolding of God's Word into all things. See Marcel Griaule, \textit{Conversations with Ogofemmeli} (London: Oxford University Press, 1965); Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, "The Dogon of the French Sudan," in \textit{African Worlds}, ed. Daryll Forde (London: Oxford University Press, 1954); and \textit{Le renard pâle}, Travaux et mémoires 72 (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie, 1965). Also see Marcel Griaule, "Le savoir des Dogon," \textit{Journal de la Société des Africanistes} 22, nos. 1–2 (1952): 27–42. What has not been realized is that the first, most simple myth known to noninitiates conforms to the "loss of paradise" and "withdrawal of God" themes common in hunting-and-gathering myths; the "marriage of heaven and earth" theme is typical for early cultivators, while the "cosmic egg" theme often accompanies megalithic grain agriculture. The "cosmic Word," Sophia, or Logos theme arose in the Hellenistic period. It would seem, in short, that Dogon sages through the centuries integrated the deepest insights of each new culture contact as yet more esoteric levels of their wisdom, guiding thereby the folk assimilation of technology into a harmonious cosmos.}

In localized cultures, the springs of the divine come from afar—from the remote heavens, deep underground, or distant lands. In some ways, the more strange the wisdom, the more power it has. Cross-culturally, mythic founders, religious heroes, shamans, and diviners share this confrontation with the liminal which lies outside structure but creates it. But not everyone can endure it, and the liminal has modes not all of which are benign.\footnote{The positive mode of the liminal expresses itself through such centrally traditional figures as the diviner, but the negative mode of the demonic and chaotic has its representative in the witch.} Indeed, on a
Divination and Deity in Africa

folk level, such contact with the outside—the strange, wild, and alien—might express itself through possession, sickness, and even death. Throughout Central, Southern, and even East Africa there has arisen in the modern period what Victor Turner has called “cults of affliction”—possession cults in which the evils and suffering brought on by hostile cultures, by the breakdown of tribal boundaries and norms, and by oppression from the white man are felt to be hateful spirits who induce illness and neuroticism. Women are especially seized by this anxiety, “neurotic” behavior, and sickness, and they can only be cured by induction into a cult to the dangerous spirits, presided over by initiates who have already been cured of the same travail.17

WILL AND PERSONHOOD IN DIVINATION

The inevitable consequence of such social distancing from local folk environments is an estrangement from the spiritual powers that have the most immediate influence on them. For good or for ill, freedom from local personal forces is obtained. Possession by the remote wild tends to move to the extreme of negative liminality: the witch, who is independent from local kin and social relationships. Witches form an extravillage and transcultural hostile band, who meet at night on distant mountaintops to practice their parodies of shamanistic freedom, cannibalism, and

the same mysterium tremendum et fascinans. Margaret Field has an illuminating note on this in her Religion and Medicine among the Ga People (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 124 ff.: “Tylor has said that every tribe believes its barbaric neighbors to be more deeply steeped in darkly wonderful magic than it is itself. This is profoundly true of the Ga when thinking of either medicines or witchcraft. A Ga will tell you that the worst witches are the Fanti, the Fanti will refer you to the Nzima, and the Nzima send you still further, till you conclude that the worst witchcraft reedes like the end of the rainbow. In medical practice, also, the more time a physician is known to have spent in Dahomey and the more medicines he can exhibit from there the better equipped he is considered, and to have been as far afield as the Northern Territories is the equivalent of having studied in Vienna.” That this is true as far away as central Africa is evidenced, for example, by the comment of Reynolds (n. 10 above), p. 99: “It is interesting to note the frequency with which acculturation occurs and the wide diffusion of particular methods of known origin, such as divining bones and divining baskets, as well as the number of diviners who are either itinerant or who have in the past travelled abroad, for example to the Congo to improve their knowledge.” Perhaps this helps partly to account for the frequency with which diviners are thought to be dangerously like, or associated with, witches. On this I have commented further in my article on witchery (n. 1 above), in the course of demonstrating that divination is in some ways the inversion of witchcraft.

incest. Personal, willful self-determination here receives its purest expression, which ends in becoming compulsively hostile to all harmonious interaction with the cosmic order. But wisdom gains in clarity of awareness, in benevolent power, and in noncompulsive freedom from its further penetration of the liminal. Its fundamental impulse is integration, not separation or impulsive fragmentation. So the most "remote" wisdom retains its divinatory function and is even superior to more local forms of divination. We have already had hints that such wisdom divination may lead to an esoteric devaluation of the power and even reality of the demigods and spirits that folk say govern local life.\(^{18}\) Unlike possession divination (and a fortiori witchery), in wisdom personality recedes as a source of power—the arbitrary will of the spirits is subordinated to a deeper, impersonal elemental process which has its source in the divine prior to form. But this encounter releases human will from its involuntary servitude to the forces acting in its immediate environment. The will is freed from the grip of demigods and is given access to a profounder knowledge and the power of choice. For both diviner and client, the consequence is an achievement of spiritual transcendence even while voluntarily submitting to universal law. True to the essential paradoxicality of freedom, through its conscious obedience to a law which underlies and generates one's social and personal world, the will becomes free of the immediate constraints of that world. The more personality is stripped from the divine process (so that the spirits, for example, are discovered to be subject to the same transformations and categories that affect human existence), the more personal independence is granted to human agency and the more important conscious will and understanding become.\(^{19}\)

It is incorrect to suppose that divination implies a fatalism. Both possession and wisdom forms are based on the assumption that (1) man can learn of the forces affecting his life, and (2) by

\(^{18}\) See nn. 10 and 13 above.

\(^{19}\) This dynamic has been subjected to keen analysis in its Hellenistic form by historians of Greek philosophy and culture in regard to the struggle between moira (destiny) and the gods. See, for example, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951); F. M. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae: A Study in the Origins of Greek Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Walter F. Otto, *The Hymnic Gods*, trans. Moses Hadas (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1954), pp. 261–86, etc. Viewed in this broader context, the modern Western conflict between "science" and "religion" is really a hoary one between wisdom and possession, and is actually an internal religious conflict centering on the issue of the role of personality and will in the process of the divine order.
Divination and Deity in Africa

dealing properly with those forces man can ameliorate or alter his conditions. Man can be more than a helpless victim of fate. But the two types of divination imply different assumptions about the role that man can take in this intervention. We have mentioned above the implications of wisdom divination. But possession tends to the assumption that man can achieve this knowledge only in a partial and fragmentary way, through a loss of conscious control to transcendent personal forces. One’s will and consciousness are taken over by the impulsive spirits and demigods, who disclose their personal wants. But one must submit to this seizure in order to learn how to deal with one’s situation and to avoid falling into madness or fatal illness. Personhood and social context are so closely identified that higher knowledge can come only through displacement of personality. Possession is, in fact, characteristic above all of societies with oppressive social structures which assign social-role identity heteronomously. Perhaps this very arbitrariness of role obligation and personal “identity” helps explain the autocratic willfullness perceived in the personal deities who overpower mediums, or who disclose their desires through “seized” omen animals, etc. In any case, by permitting oneself to be taken over by more powerful, mysterious persons, one can affect and improve one’s own and others’ situations. The mystery of life is taken into and integrated with everyday experience.

The underlying structure is sacrificial. One of the most pervasive features and accompaniments to divination of any sort is explicit

20 Exceptionally vivid accounts of possession divination and other forms of possession trance, with an analysis of their relationship, curative and otherwise, to neurosis and illness, can be found in Margaret J. Field, Search for Security: An Ethno-Psychiatric Study of Rural Ghana (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1960).

21 This formulation attempts to draw together the results of several important recent studies of possession trance. It is the indigenous sense of the heteronomous and imposed nature of social identity that is the key factor, I would suggest, that unifies the sometimes very different results of these researches. Lewis emphasizes the sense of oppression and deprivation both in “peripheral” and “central” possession cults in Ecstatic Religion, p. 176; even where leaders of society are involved in possession, this expresses both a general sense of oppression by the cosmos and the inadequacy of “normal” consciousness for social demands on the leaders. Mary Douglas suggests, in Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), pp. 73–98, that the lack of strong social articulation (norms and group identity) leads to the slackening of conscious control; self identity is diffuse and weak, reflecting social identity. But Lenora Greenbaum and Erika Bourguignon show statistically that possession trance occurs especially in societies with slaves, two or more free social classes, and dense populations over 100,000—a.e., societies with fixed internal social distinctions (see Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change [n. 2 above], pp. 47, 50, 83–84, 323, 326). The common appearance of possession trance in such open, flexible societies as Brazil and the United States, however, shows that “social rigidity” is not the only factor.
sacrifice. Occasionally the act of divination is a sacrifice as such: from the entrails of the victim (as among the Nilotics and others of East Africa), or from the movements of a sacrificed fowl (or even from the fact of its death, as in the poison ordeals of Zaire cultures), or from the bones of previously sacrificed animals (as in the basket divination of Central and Southern Africa), the verdict is "read." But in a deeper sense the logic of all kinds of divination is sacrificial. For they all center on an act of transformation in which one's existence is offered up to the paradigms and essences mastering one's life in order to receive it back renewed and restructured in accordance with the divine order. Here again, as always, it is impossible to refer to divination as "magical" rather than as "religious."

THE DIVINATION OF THE FON OF DAHOMEY

One of the best-described systems of divination in Africa is that of the Fon of Dahomey. By way of conclusion, I would like to sketch some of its characteristics—not simply to demonstrate points made earlier, but also to extend them.

There are actually several different kinds of divination among the Fon. The most complicated of them is termed "Fa," which shares many essential features with related systems from eastern Nigeria to the Ivory Coast; it is an international system of wisdom in the sense discussed above.22 Less esoteric methods of divining are known by every Fon, and often practiced by family heads: casting of kola nuts, analyzing the entrails of fowl, or even spinning eggs.23 These methods are less awesome than the mediumistic divination of the spirit shrines, in the course of which the *vodu*—the great demigods—enter into and possess their priests and announce their will. The relationship between the *vodu* and their mediums is passionate and ecstatic, and the mediums often structure their initiations like marriage ceremonies; the priests are *vodusi," mates of the god." They say a man's chief desire is for his *vodu*, and this desire leads to the divine; the revelation of life is through overwhelming power and desire.24 Shrines to the *vodu* fill the land, and they make their will known to those who

ignore them by afflicting the guilty party or near relatives with sickness, constant bad luck, psychosis, or death. Worship of the vodu is the everyday religion of the Fon. The demigods control the weather, fertility, trade, war, and nature; they make up a complex pantheon having four internal divisions: beings of the sky, the earth, the sea, and thunder.25

Coordinating the vodu, however, are the mediating principles of Legba-Fa—patrons of divination, “voice” of the Supreme Being (Mawu-Lisa). The Fon have a cultic worship of the twin-being Mawu-Lisa, but this female-male High God is also closely identified with Fa and the principle of destiny:

It is Mawu as parent of the other gods, who gave them their power. It is Mawu, who, according to the diviners of Destiny, holds the formulas for the creation of man and matter. It is Mawu who sent the art of divination to earth so that man might know how to appease the anger and thwart the ill intentions of the reigning pantheon heads, Mawu’s children. It is Mawu who gave her favorite son, the trickster Legba, to man to help him circumvent Fate. Most important of all, it is Mawu who, though she divided her kingdom among her children, the other Great Gods, and gave each autonomous rule over his own domain, has yet withheld from all of them the knowledge of how to create, so that the ultimate destiny of the universe is still in her hands.26

Before appealing to any vodu to cease its affliction of oneself, one must first of all consult a diviner of Fa to discover which demigod is involved. Thus, both in terms of cultic action and spiritual status, Fa’s link to the Supreme Being and source of reality is prior to and necessary for the cults to more local, personal spiritual beings.

The role of Legba, the trickster companion to Fa, is a fascinating aspect of Fon religion. Legba is the agent of disorder and capriciousness, who is said to stir up trouble wantonly at times so that people will turn to and sacrifice to the vodu for help; but he is also the power who can free the afflicted from the coercion of the vodu if appealed to. He is not subject to the laws of this lower world, and through him people can avoid bad fate; yet, significantly, he is the companion of Fa, and access to Fa can be gained only through preliminary sacrifice to Legba. He is even said to be

25 See Melville J. and Francis S. Herskovits, An Outline of Dahomean Religious Belief, Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association 41 (Menasha, Wis., 1933) for a detailed description (also see the work cited in n. 23 above).
26 Ibid., p. 12.
History of Religions

another aspect of Fa.27 Thus it would not do to term him the Fon "Satan," as Westerners have been inclined to do; for all his brutal and phallic activities, Legba embodies a freedom ultimately subordinate to the divine order and to Mawu. It is as if, beyond the immediate human world of personal spirits (the vodu), structured personality must dissolve completely in an experience approaching chaos. But on the other side of this experience of the seemingly demonic stands Fa, the "voice" of Mawu, the embodiment of wisdom and of elemental laws deeper than personality.

If divination is founded on the logic of sacrifice, Legba embodies clearly the principle of transformation at its heart, the transformation that leads to enhanced order and harmony (Fa) at the end. What seems to personal identity as "evil," as it gazes from "this side" into the Mystery, is disclosed on the other side to be a first step into a grander cosmic harmony under God. The evil of witches, therefore, represents a personal paralysis in the journey into the remote beyond; the witch wanders in darkness in the bush, motivated by an annihilating agony and hatred. Legba’s realm, too, is the bush; he is even the patron spirit of hunters, but he is able, as the witch is not, to move into the yet more remote vastness that lies beyond the wild bush, to the region where Fa, the embodiment of the Word of God, reigns.

All this would be worthy enough of our astonished attention even if these conceptions were to be found only among the Fon. But, on the contrary, tricksters associated with the wisdom that divination conveys in its most esoteric forms are found throughout West Africa.28

27 See Maupoil, pp. 76–84, 177–78, 190 ff., 332, etc.; the works cited in previous notes on Dahomean religion have more details on Legba, as do studies of Yoruba religion on the essentially identical Eshu, like J. Westcott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster: Definition and Interpretation in Yoruba Iconography," Africa, vol. 32, no. 4 (1962); E. Bolaji Idowu, Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1963), etc.

28 The Practically Identical Eshu of the Yoruba has been mentioned already. Among the Twi peoples, Anansi the spider plays a similar role; even the "Aunt Nancy" of South Carolina and the Ananse of Jamaica and Dutch Guiana retain the unpredictable but also healing wisdom of the west African trickster. For her Akan-Ashanti legends, see Robert S. Rattray, Akan-Ashanti Folk Tales (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), and also his Ashanti Proverbs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929). She also appears in Togoland, as A. W. Cardinall, Tales Told in Togoland (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), witnesses. According to K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti," in African Worlds (n. 15 above), p. 192, Ananse is one of the names and forms of Onyame, the Supreme Being. Spider divination is also reported in the Calabar area of eastern Nigeria, and even further east in the Cameroons: see Paul Gebouer, Spider Divination in the Cameroons, Publications in Anthropology 10 (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Public Museums, 1964). And over 1,000 miles to the west, in Mali, the trickster patron of divination among the Dogon, Yurugu, can take the form of a spider, and as such is attended to in divination (see Griaule and
Divination and Deity in Africa

Unlike Legba, who is said to take pleasure in deception, and unlike the *vodu*, Fa is disinterested in passions and clings unswervingly to truth. In the same way, his priests are unlike other priests, even bearing a special name. They are not *vodusi*, “mates of the demigods,” but *bokono*, “repellers (of the dangerous).” The Yoruba call their Ifa priests *babalawo*, “father of mysteries,” a term also known in Dahomey. The priests, priests, Sakpata, Da, and even Mawu and Lisa are various according to their worship, the *bokono* says, but Fa is the same everywhere: “He is the unity of life: he is the interior voice of Se [the Universal Spirit, impersonal form of Mawu-Lisa], and the exterior voice which reveals the truth to those who consult it.”

The system of Fa is built up through the interaction of 256 signs, each of which is an essential mode of reality. Each element is the sum of a series of binary oppositions (open or closed cowrie shells, whole or broken lines, odd or even numbers, plus or minus, “male” or “female”); together they generate the whole world, including the *vodu* themselves. Thus, he who understands and controls the signs controls the *vodu*. In Fon myths, even the *vodu* are represented as coming to Fa to understand their own dilemmas and get out of scrapes. But though “Fa is the king of life here below” (the vice-regent and homologue of God the king above), his force is used always for harmony and regeneration of life. The very word “Fa” signifies “freshness,” “sweetness or pleasantness,” “coolness,” and is the opposite of the “heat” of anxiety, tumult, anger, danger, or death. The *bokono* is consecrated to this “coolness”: he is not an ecstatic, but must be given over to tranquil, pleasant, and benevolent consciousness, ethical behavior, and restraint. If he becomes angry or does an evil deed, the forces that he engaged through his meditative serenity will turn on him. It is his vocation to restore equilibrium in personal lives and especially in the society in general. Every regular ceremony of Fon worship, and

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29 Maupoil, pp. 112 ff., also 60 ff.
30 Ibid., p. 62.
31 Ibid., pp. 7, 10 ff., 19–21 ff., etc.
32 Ibid., pp. 4–5; Fa can even give fertility and has a phallic aspect, absorbing this side of Legba, but here merely expresses the harmonious mode of divine creativity which God reserves for himself and his embodiment. See ibid., p. 9, and the quotation given above on p. 172.
of course every crisis, requires his divinatory intervention to determine which of the hundreds of vodu shall be propitiated, and how. Despite all their power and willful personalities, their sustenance, recognition, and therefore even their existence are dependent on the cool and wise science of Fa. A Fa priest must know more than anyone else about the entirety of Fon religion, as a consequence, and the training of a bokono takes many years, which also traditionally included study abroad at Ifa centers in Yorubaland and elsewhere. The proverbs, stories, and myths appended to each of the signs must be learned; they comprise in their totality the entire mythical corpus of the Fon. The signs deal with the Creation and embody various of its moments and powers. Many of the Fa myths deal with the triumph of the cleverness embodied by Fa over the raw power and arbitrariness of the vodu. Here, in fact, are the sources for the Br'er Fox and Br'er Rabbit stories, and others of their type, popularized in American folk literature in the Uncle Remus tales. The signs govern not only the vodu, but also all the arts. They are all wisdom. The bokono is an authority on history, medicine, technology, and psychology, and the greater of them used to have extensive "hospital" quarters for lodging the sick and disturbed who needed their care.

It is said that there are 600 verses that advanced bokono have memorized for each sign, covering all aspects of life. Obviously, it is impossible to present even superficially an analysis of the whole system. I would like just to touch on some aspects of the first sixteen signs, called the "mothers" of the others. Every Fa sign is composed of four levels; each level is made up of either a double or a single line. This permits sixteen basic signs. But just as double lines are "female," single lines "male," and each level "mated" to another, so each sign is conceived of as a whole "being" which requires a second sign as a "mate" to be whole; thus there are 256 whole signs built out of multiple binary operations. The first sixteen are the "mothers" of the others since each is matched with a duplicate of itself: in other words, the first sixteen signs are all perfect twins. But even these pure and ancestral signs are structured in a kinship hierarchy. The first two signs are the "parents" of all the rest and represent Mawu (the Mother, east, day, light, head, and thought, but also earth) and

33 Ibid., p. 128. Some Fon legends insist that Fa originated at Ile-Ife, the "sacred city" of the Yoruba, while others suggest an origin in Mecca, the axis mundi of Islam. The system without doubt has a very complicated history, in which Muslim philosophy and even Babylonian wisdom have had their parts.
Divination and Deity in Africa

Lisa (the Father, west, night, moon, flesh, land of the dead, passion, and air or heaven). The following two signs are water and fire, comprising with their “parents” the classical four elements of antiquity, as well as the four cardinal points, the four basic colors, the seasons, times of day, and so on.34 Just as the first four signs are divided into two couples, the other signs are paired, but the last sign of the sixteen sums up all the earlier ones (just as in the Gnostic Ogdoads and Pentads, with which there are several parallels) and is called the “Great Mother of Life” and wife to God.35

The progression of the signs, and their generation of each other, is really the hidden history of creation itself, as Fa myths make clear. Before each consultation the bokono calls up the signs, invoking and “remembering” the primordial order. By introducing the current problem into this harmony he not only relates it to its roots in Creation itself, but discovers how to reconcile it to the divine order. Just as the signs themselves embody cosmic time, so does the shrine room of Fa priests correspond in every detail to the architecture of universal space. Thus every consultation consciously but esoterically occurs within all space and time and aims at the harmonization of all life.36

It is said that one never finishes learning about Fa; there are


35 Maupoil, pp. 557–58, 560–62. The Muslim hâtî system used by the Nupe of Nigeria also involves the four elements and terms like “Mothers,” etc. See S. Nadel, Nupe Religion (London: Oxford University Press, 1954). We do know that Persian-Muslim scholars like Sohravardi (d. 1191) developed philosophical-symbolic systems which merged Mazdaean, Greek, and even more ancient speculations into cosmogonies having three stages: the transcendent essences, the “Mothers,” produced the archangel theurgers, archetypal persons or lords, who produced the angels souls activating lower worlds. See J. Duchesne-Guillemin, Symbols and Values in Zoroastrianism (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 159 ff. On the history of Fa, see Maupoil, pp. 50–51, 263, and Trautman, passim.

36 Maupoil, pp. 166–219; 241, fig. 21; 168, fig. 6; etc. On the complex symbolisms worked into the divining tray, as an example, also see Clara Odugbesan, “Femininity in Yoruba Religious Art,” in Man in Africa, ed. Phyllis M. Kaberry and Mary Douglas (London: Tavistock Publications, 1969), p. 200.

176
History of Religions

levels and degrees within it. Even elderly bokono set out on journeys that may take them into distant parts of West Africa to sit at the feet of famous sages and learn more. Bernard Maupoil, whose study of Fa is still unequaled, had the immense advantage of having as his informant the chief bokono of the former Fon kingdom, Gedegbe. This truly wise man was responsible, during the days of the sovereign glory of the Fon, for divining for the king and the entire country. He also examined every aspiring bokono before the priest was permitted to practice and regulated the ethical behavior and teachings of bokono throughout the kingdom. Gedegbe knew entire levels of Fa not accessible to anyone else. These higher levels of Fa had nothing at all to say about the demigods or spirits; they were instead about the interaction of the primary cosmic elements themselves, and one was devoted to astrology. Fa, in short, works a depersonalization of the Fon cosmos.

The great fault, in the ethics that is implied in Fa philosophy, is excessive self-will. Fa is not a method of changing one’s fate, but of adjusting to it (in the active, not the passive, sense). Knowing his own characteristic engrained failings, the wise man avoids subjecting himself to otherwise inevitable pitfalls. One must learn to accept one’s own limits. These “limits,” the Fon believe, are chosen by oneself before birth as one’s destiny-soul. Maintaining a good relationship with our destiny, knowing its possibilities and inadequacies, enables us to make the very best life possible for ourselves. Ignorance of the powers bearing on us makes us entirely their victim. The fortunate and happy can push their luck too far; the unfortunate can through hopeless passivity make their lot gratuitously agonizing.

The individual soul has no will, say the bokono; only Mawu has will, and the individual destiny-soul is a particular manifestation of that will.\(^{37}\) Thus an evil man is not necessarily to be blamed for his actions, for his soul is not guilty if it does not get caught up in the deed and persist in it, exceeding its fate. Likewise, the excessively (and hypocritically) good man will suffer for his pretentiousness.\(^{38}\) In consulting Fa, a person is brought face to face with

\(^{37}\) Maupoil, pp. 404, 388–89. According to Gedegbe, the various levels or kinds of soul known to man are merely stages in man’s quest for God and their own deepest identity. The most obvious spiritual aspect in us is that which links us to our ancestors (the joto, ancestor soul), while diviners and a few others late in life attain to knowledge of their Fa-essence, their deepest destiny-soul, the kpoli. Beyond that dwells the infinite God. See ibid., p. 386.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., p. 404.
Divination and Deity in Africa

eternal destiny, and from this dispassionate vantage point can accept and come to grips with his individual lot in a rational and fully conscious way. The judgment may indeed be harsh, but usually there are ways to mitigate a severe decree, and in any case his responsibilities and expectations are revealed in detail; to the limit of any man's ability he is in control of his fate.

The radical difference of this approach to the divine from that of man's heated, passionate relationship to the vodu is suggestive. While the vodu, spiritual persons, erase human personality in possession, Fa emphasizes the unique personality of the client while submitting it to a depersonalized divine order. The irony of this forces us to the realization that Fa is fundamentally a criticism of the popular religion of the vodu. The legends of Fa themselves reflect this: again and again we find the vodu helpless, their power useless, until they consult Fa (who is outwardly a weakling, in some versions a boneless, amorphous being). The vodu in these tales are, in fact, the paradigms for the clients who hear the stories during the consultation. Just as the client has troubles and comes to Fa, so too in illo tempore a vodu had an essentially similar problem, and Fa supplied the answer—which becomes the answer to the client. The vodu and mankind are persons on the same level from the transcendent perspective of Fa. Fa even instructs mankind in the ways to avoid the arbitrary power of the vodu—to socialize them and establish a predictable mutuality with them. Men thus receive their personalities back in the world of Fa, though they might have seemed to have lost them through subordination to the vodu. But the system of Fa implies more, inasmuch as it suggests that there is a larger impersonal order that even the vodu cannot violate. Fa, the greater bokono say, is not a being at all, but simply the message or voice of Se (Spirit)—that is, of Mawu.39 The power working in man, in the world, and in the vodu, is all of Se. There is nothing else.40 We are not surprised, therefore, when we read that "the very greatest bokono, put in

39 Ibid., pp. 387–89. One Fa proverb insists: "One ought not to put Fa on one side and Mawu on the other—it is Fa that one names Mawu," and several others make the same point (see ibid., p. 31). For Fa is really not a person, but a process leading to transcendence and "at-one-ment." Several myths of the origin of Fa tell that in the beginning Fa was killed by the vodu, who were resentful of his impartial justice and truth, but that there arose from his grave, or from the parts of his divided body (Haimuwele style) the palm nuts used for divination or the signs making up the Fa system. Fa is the type, in short, of the redemptive power of sacrifice. Every session begins and ends with sacrifice, and initiation into bokono status is accomplished through sacrifices, etc.

40 Ibid., pp. 387, 399–401.
History of Religions

confidence, do not hesitate to declare that the vodu are only a creation of man.”41

CONCLUSION

John S. Mbiti has commented that "with a few exceptions, African systems of divination have not been carefully studied, though diviners and divination are found in almost every community.”42 Quite a number of studies give more or less superficial data about divination techniques in various African cultures, but profound investigations of the caliber of Bernard Maupoil’s work on Fa are exceptional. Since, however, the whole point of divination lies in the realm of meaning, mere reportage of external details is scarcely even the beginning of understanding, and our ignorance of the inner worlds of African divination remains almost complete. It is not accidental that the excellence of Maupoil’s study is largely due to his familiarity and intimacy with the elite of Fa divination. It has not been sufficiently appreciated to what degree divination, especially of the “wisdom” variety, is an esoteric form of spirituality.43

A larger view of divination discovers in them profound implications for the spiritual self-understanding of the cultures making use of them. In many cases, divination in African cultures amounts to a direct cult to the Supreme Being which has been ignored by Western researchers. One hopes this neglect will not continue. This paper, at any rate, should suggest something of the riches that could reward future study of divination in Africa and elsewhere.

An indication of the value of our phenomenological analysis for an understanding of divination is in the light it sheds on the social role of divination in history. We have mentioned in passing that divination methods imply certain social milieus. There is much evidence from Africa that wisdom forms of divination arise and flourish above all in centralized kingdoms, as was the case also for Babylonian, Chinese, and Middle-American divinations. Such complex classifications require a specialized training and standardization that centralized instruction alone permits. Such regulation also assures that the tendency we have discovered in wisdom

41 Ibid., pp. 263–64.
43 Even Mbiti speaks of “the unnecessary halo of secrecy” surrounding divination beliefs!
Divination and Deity in Africa

divination to undermine the personal and immediate social realities that confront the diviner and the client, is controlled as well and turned to the purposes of a hierarchical cosmos and state. Here wisdom divination acts to integrate many metaphysical levels of reality with the social system and with kingship. Gedegbe complained to Maupoil, in fact, that, with the destruction of the Fon kingship by the French, the control of the Fa system and the certification of diviners by the court diviner (Gedegbe himself) also lapsed; the consequence was the loss of uniformity of teaching, the disappearance of entire deeper levels of interpretation, and, worst of all, the rise of self-seeking and amoral diviners who used their knowledge for power, demanding high prices from clients and even stooping to sorcery.44 Divination began to be “individualized” and its critical analysis of reality put to work for persons seeking to escape the consequences of the chaotic breakdown of society. But as long as a society remains near the subsistence level and relatively undifferentiated, the wisdom that is handed down through the generations in divination requires the ongoing patronage of a centralized rule which can subsidize the training and the full-time priestly diviners. Without this the system loses its esoteric dynamic and becomes part of folk practice, like the hakata dice of Central and Southern Africa (formerly part of an elaborate divination practiced in the Zimbabwe kingdom, these dice are now widely used and apparently lack deep esoteric meaning).

In more differentiated and stratified social structures, a general specialization of roles permits the permanent separation of wisdom structures from the patronage of the state, and the inner tendency of this form of divination to undermine immediate social contexts by dissolving them into deeper universal elements now serves as an aid to individualized protest against the entire society. A key instance is the transformation of astrology in the Hellenistic period from the state-oriented institution it was in earlier ages to a science espoused by cosmopolitan spiritual movements peripheral to the society and its religions. Divination now served the individual and claimed for itself an international and intercultural status that put it above the national gods and cults. Though its protest still remained largely passive and intellectual in form, astrology nevertheless did serve as a protest against established social and cultic institutions.45 A similar history seems to have played itself

44 Maupoil, pp. xi–xii, 148, 159–63, etc.
History of Religions

out in China, as the study of the I Ching moved from the Shang courts to later mandarin and eremitic circles. Early science in the West (hermetic and alchemistic in form) partook of the same dynamic, as we have mentioned earlier, and indeed, the fascination that the Kabbalah exercised upon peripheral spiritualities in the West reminds us that it performed a role very like the wisdom divination we have analyzed above for the Jews too, enabling them to negate spiritually an oppressive sociopolitical status. The early Buddhist analysis of dharma may have been part of essentially the same kind of protest against Brahmanism, as well, though of course here we are moving further away from divination as such. But, in contemporary American society, the use of astrology as a wisdom divination, especially for working-class women and for such protest cultists as the “hippies,” serves again to undermine immediate social and personal contexts of oppression or alienation and to confirm a transcendent context of personal value. The same attraction may be felt in “policy” gambling in inner-city ghettos, remote though this is in other respects from full divination. As with possession divination, wisdom divination rejects the heteronomous and oppressive assignment of role and social identity. It finds the self in a deeper and more universal, lawful, and impersonal reality.

It is interesting to compare this response of wisdom divination to the far more drastic ones of possession forms in similar social contexts. Possession divination tends to suggest a more fragmented, personal, and arbitrary universe—dominated not by law, but by power. In chaotic social circumstances, cultural breakdown, or change, possession divination can escalate into full-blown millenary movements. Contrary to the more passive and intellectual wisdom divination, in such movements passionate attempts are made to break through heteronomous social identities and norms into a new ecstatic reality. Here the self is affirmed through a radical antithesis between ecstatic and banal consciousness, opposing the undifferentiated, liminal group identity of the ecstasies to the differentiated, evil social world of the past and the outsider.

One further, more tentative observation might be made in

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I am indebted to discussions with Ms. Frances Butler of the Department of Sociology, Allegheny College, for this reference to contemporary astrology. Her studies have led her to conclude that for devotees the zodiac provides a kind of mystical kin network of universal dimensions, giving an immediate “social” framework in which strangers can be placed, establishing a fellowship more immutable and reliable than troubled personal ties, and supplying a new sense of self outside of immediate social pressures.
Divination and Deity in Africa

collection. A method that some millenary ecstatic movements have used to stabilize themselves, once the first period of enthusiasm and possession, mediumistic prediction, and eschatological expectation has passed, is to transmute their critique of society from possession into wisdom forms, which at the same time permit the development of a more differentiated social structure within the cult. This is certainly the trajectory followed by Christianity, to take only one example, when theology assumed the central value previously claimed by charismatic and oracular experience. True to the underlying nature of the two forms of divinatory understanding, even in this transmutation the more passive and integrative thrust of wisdom acted to replace the violent disintegrative (and schismatic) tendency of possession. Both forms agreed in criticizing immediate social and personal realities, however, for, as this essay has tried to show, such a motivation is part of the fundamental intentionality of divination as such.

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