Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualisation, Narrative, and Interpretation

Barbara Tedlock

Abstract

Divination, which is a way of exploring the unknown, has been practised worldwide for millennia. It involves complementary modes of cognition associated with representational and presentational symbolism. Wherever a theory of divination has been carefully elicited from practitioners of the art, there is a recognition of overlapping inductive, intuitive and interpretative narrative techniques and ways of knowing. In any society in which mechanical divinatory procedures are combined with visualisation or bursts of intuition, researchers should be able to empirically investigate this cognitive-embodied field of practical mastery. This investigation, in turn, ought to enable them to develop meditative empathy towards acts of divination as well as a sophisticated theory of divinatory practice.

Introduction

Divination is a way of exploring the unknown in order to elicit answers (that is, oracles) to questions beyond the range of ordinary human understanding. All known peoples on earth have practised some form of divination. It has had a critical role in the classical world, ancient Egypt and the Middle East, in the Americas, India, Tibet, Mongolia, Japan, China, Korea and Africa (Loewe and Blacker 1981; Peek 1991). Questions about future events, past disasters whose causes cannot be explained, things unknown hidden from sight or removed in space, appropriate conduct in critical situations, including the healing of illness, determining the times and modes of religious worship, and making choices of persons for particular tasks—all these are common subjects of divinatory inquiry.

The means of divination are many, including water and crystal gazing, the casting of lots or sortilege, the reading of natural omens, the taking of hallucinogenic drugs, dreaming, and the contemplation of mystic spirals, amulets, labyrinths, mandalas and thangkas (Purce 1974; Grossinger 1980, 107–88; Ortiz de Montellano 1990, 144–50; Shrestha and Baker 1997; Tedlock 2001). In some instances, the diviner undergoes physical or psychological changes so as to be able to serve as a vehicle for divinatory power, while at other times, animals, objects, and events are themselves considered signs of an external superhuman power (Morales 1995).
A Brief History of the Use of the Terms “Divination” and “Mantic”

The English word “divination” comes down to us from the Latin noun *divinatio-onis* f. *(divino)* “the gift of prophecy, divination,” formed from the past participle of the verb *divinare,* “to foretell, prophesy, forebode, divine the future.” This noun is closely related to the adjective *divinus-a-um,* “belonging or relating to a deity, divine” (Cassell’s Latin-English/English-Latin Dictionary, 1955). Cicero, in his treatise *De Divinatione* (Concerning Divination), informs us that the Latin word, because of its derivation from *divinus,* meaning belonging or relating to a deity, was an improvement on the original Greek word *mantike,* derived from mania (*furor* in Latin), which meant madness, raving, insanity, or inspiration (Pease 1920).

Plato, in his description of the art of prophecy in his dialogue *Phaedrus,* defended the ancient Greek interest in madness:

> Our ancestors who invented our vocabulary thought there was no shame or reproach in madness; otherwise they would not have connected the noblest of the arts, which foretells the future, with this very mania. It was because they regarded madness under divine guidance as a splendid thing that they gave it this name manic or more recently mantike (Quoted in Helmbold and Rabinowitz 1956, 25).

Plato also described another ancient Greek term *oionistic* (*oio-* “thinking,” *-nous- “understanding,” and *hist- “enquiry”), that referred to the inductive art of the uninspired and sane who inquire purely from human reasoning into the future by observing bird flights and other omens, concluding that “both in name and in fact, madness is nobler than sanity [for] the first proceeds from a god, the other from mere men” (Helmbold and Rabinowitz 1956, 245). The term *mantike* originally referred only to the first of Plato’s two types of prophecy, intuitive or natural divination (*adidaktos*), consisting of a kind of mania, madness or ecstasy of divine possession. Later, however, by an extension of its meaning, the concept came to include the second—oionic—inductive, or artificial divination (*technike*), as well (Flaceliere 1965, 4).

While the early Greeks emphasised mantic or inspired behaviour, it was never practised by Romans. In Rome, there were no prophecies emanating from divinely inspired seers who could look far into the future or deep into the past. For Cicero and other practitioners of the Roman State Religion, the only legitimate divination concerned the question of whether an action about to be performed had, or had not, the sanction of the gods. Such indications of divine will, called *auguria* or *signa,* were taken from the phenomena of nature: originally from birds. Divine assent was indicated by the appearance of specific birds on the right hand of the observer (Pease 1920, 154).

Over the years, many so-called inductive or rational forms of divination have been compared with Western scientific techniques. Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, for example, argued that the science of divination was a system of classification (Durkheim and Mauss 1963, 77). Marlene Dobkin labelled divination the non-Western equivalent of various psychological tests including TATs and Rorschachs (Dobkin 1969, 140), while Alan Harwood called divination an aetiology or science of causes (Harwood 1970, 111). Divination has also been categorised as a diagnostic procedure (Ackerknect 1971, 168; Fabrega and Silver...
1973, 38), and June Nash coined a new word for divination—sociopsy—which she argued was comparable to biopsy in Western medicine (Nash 1967, 133). As these analogies between divination and science indicate, the English term retains a strongly Roman rather than a Greek flavour.

One of the major problems in the theoretical developments within ethno-
graphy, folklore, and the history of religions has been the lack of comparability of concepts due to the fact that the terms used often spring from or apply to only one culture, or else a small group of cultures. So, because our understanding of divination comes to us artificially narrowed by Roman practice, we might consider using the concept mantic or -mancy (as in scapulimancy or geomancy and so on), which has a different history. Mantic and -mancy are derived from the Greek term mantike, which in its early usage simply referred to inspired divination of past, as well as present, and future events. Later Greek usage became more inclusive, combining divine possession, shamanic trances, and other inspirational methods on the one hand with inductive methods such as those of Roman divination.

Unfortunately, however, there is some instability and confusion surrounding the word mantic itself, as it has come to be used by ethnographers. Victor Turner, in his monograph, Ndembu Divination: Its Symbolism and Techniques, used the term to indicate the divining of future events: “The diviner’s insight is retrospective, and not mantic, he discloses what has happened, and does not foretell future events. Ndembu diviners are seldom oracular, unlike many Southern Bantu diviners” (Turner 1961, 2). Seven years later, however, in The Drums of Affliction, he changed his usage of the term mantic to favour the ancient oracular or inspirational meaning: “The diviners disclose what has happened, and do not foretell future events. Unlike many Southern Bantu diviners, they are seldom oracular or mantic” (Turner 1968, 27). This instability and overlap in the use of the terms divination and mantic has indicated to some researchers that there is room for an intermediate term between inductive and the intuitive forms of divination. This intermediate form has been labelled “interpretative divination” (Park 1974, 917). It requires the combination of correct inductive procedure with the special intuitive gift that sets the diviner apart from others.

**Divination and Modes of Consciousness**

Everywhere it occurs, divination involves complementary modes of cognition associated with primary process and secondary process thinking or knowing (Fernandez 1991; Kracke 1992). Diviners are specialists who use the idea of moving from a boundless to a bounded realm of existence in their practice. Compared with their peers, diviners excel in insight, imagination, fluency in language, and knowledge of cultural traditions. During a divination, they construct usable knowledge from oracular messages. To do so, they link diverse domains of representational information and symbolism with emotional or presentational experience.

In representational symbolism, specific intentional reference is paramount, the medium of expression is relatively automated, and inductive reality is paramount. In presentational symbolism, meaning emerges as a result of an
experiential immersion in the expressive patterns of the symbolic medium, which is grasped intuitively (Hunt 1995, 41–2).

By combining representational with presentational symbolism within a single narrative structure, diviners provide a surplus or superabundance of understanding for their clients. During the act of divination, individual creativity operates: jumbled ideas, metaphors and symbols suggest various possible interpretations which slowly give way to an ordered sequencing and to more limited interpretations. Finally, through dialogue between the diviner and the client, these interpretations are superseded by an unambiguous classification of the causes of the situation and the material needed to respond to and change it.

Among the indigenous peoples of the Americas, divination often combines visualisation and embodiment with the narration of myths. Knowledge of medicinal plants, for example, is often received in dreams from animals. In one legend, a Blackfoot woman with tuberculosis noticed beaver tracks and left food for the animal, which returned the favour by appearing in her dreams to give her a cure for her illness. She tried the remedy—an infusion of lodge pole pine resin—while singing. After much vomiting, her chest cleared and she became well (Lipp 1996, 105). This type of herbal knowledge received during dreams was not accepted unthinkingly but was subjected to empirical tests of its effectiveness.

The Navajo, living in the American South-West, determine the cause of illness by gazing at the sun, moon, or stars, as well as by listening, hand-trembling, and embodying their mythic characters in such a way as to arrive at sudden knowledge. Diviners are often chosen during the performance of a Hand Trembling Chant. In one case, a woman audience member was suddenly seized with an attack of trembling during a chant. It began at her knees then moved to her hands and culminated in wide swings of her right arm. She made many parallel marks in the traditional sand painting, and patted her body from her feet to her head. Her trembling continued through several acts of the long chant; when it subsided, the patient, who was not a seer, said that the woman’s trembling had revealed to her the cause of her illness. Eleven years before, she had been inside a hogan (the traditional octagonal house) when a young man, standing outside, was struck by lightning and hurled head first into the hogan (Kluckhohn and Wyman 1940, 175). In this area of the world, being narrowly missed by a lightning bolt gives one the ability to perform divination.

In a normal hand-trembling ritual, a diviner is called to a home where she washes her hands and forearms. Then, using one of a variety of methods, she sprinkles corn pollen on the inside right forearm, from her elbow all the way down to the palm of her right hand. Next, she sprinkles the pollen along the inside surface of her thumb out to its tip, then along each finger. Now, sitting with her legs stretched out forward and her eyes closed, she sings one or two songs addressed to the Gila Monster (Heloderma suspectum), a night-hunting beaded lizard whose jerky bodily movements resemble those of a hand trembler. Concentrating on the imaginary form of the Gila Monster, she asks it silently for information concerning the hidden problem. When she slips into trance, her extended hand begins to shake involuntarily. At this point, she may open her eyes and gaze at the sun, moon, or a star.

As she does so, she may see, as an after-image of the heavenly body, a symbol
from the sand painting that might be used in a future healing ceremony for her client. At times, the hand trembling alone without star gazing leads to an altered state in which the diviner’s entire body shudders until she suddenly “sees” or “hears” the exact nature and extent of the problem at hand. As her senses focus on the problem, the trembling stops and she shares her answer with her client, telling her what chant or other ceremony will help her to solve her problem (Morgan 1931; Wyman 1936a; 1936b; Reichard 1950, 96–103; Schwarz 1997, 261).

Theories of Divination

Wherever a theory of divination has been elicited directly from diviners in their native language, we find a clear recognition of inductive, intuitive and interpretative techniques and ways of knowing. For example, in South Africa among the Zulus, an izangoma, or diviner, by the name of Sikhumbana explained to a researcher that there are three main methods of divining (Kohler 1941, 28 and 60): through the spirits, with bones, and with the head. The first type is a form of intuitive divination where medicines are used to enable the diviner to communicate with the spirits who are located in the roof. Divination with bones is an inductive process of placing bones in medicine and looking at them in order to find out what the client wants to know. Finally, “divining with the head” involves an interpretative approach which is neither purely a non-rational possession nor a purely rational inductive process of examination of tangible objects or natural events. Here we have a continuum of mental processes and behaviour ranging from the showiness of trance possession to inductive techniques involving the manipulation of tangible objects with the intermediate possibility of manipulation or narration interrupted by sudden, deeply embodied insight.

Paul Bohannan noted a similar combination of mental processes among the Tiv. He described these diviners as nervous types who “are called upon at a more or less pre-conscious level to garner information about feelings as well as information about overt events.” They use divining-chains, which encourage them to allow their fantasies and feelings to emerge into consciousness, a technique that is similar to the psychoanalytical practice of free-floating attention (Bohannan 1975, 152). Thus, Tiv divining-chain oracles cannot be classified as either strictly inductive or strictly intuitive, but rather interpretative. Shona divination also falls into this interpretative area. Here the diviner begins with a seemingly inductive use of a tangible object, in this case dice, which he casts once or twice until he suddenly “knows everything,” and is able to tell his clients such things as where they have come from, the name of the deceased, the type of person the deceased was, and the cause of death (Gelfand 1962, 106–10).

Among the Yoruba, Ifa divination takes the form of poetic narratives, or verses, called itan, or myth-legend, which describe a previous divination for a legendary person or animal. They are part of Yoruba mythology and regarded as historically true. During divination, the reciting of these verses occurs after the diviner casts a chain of seeds or beats palm-nuts together. Both of these activities create a particular figure pertaining to the client. At this point, the legendary character whose divination serves as the precedent for the current divination is described as either sacrificing to the deities and prospering, or
failing to sacrifice to them and suffering. While there are many traditional Ifa narrative verses, new ones can be learned when one dreams of divining. Some individuals are even said to be born with Ifa verses inside them, so that as soon as they are taught the figures and a few verses of Ifa, they introduce these new verses. Although no new figures can ever be added to the divinatory repertoire, there is simply no end to Ifa narratives. And, while it is taboo for diviners to use this traditional mythic knowledge for secular purposes, some Ifa narratives are retold in other contexts as folktales (Bascom 1969, 131; Abimbola 1977).

During the reciting of the verses associated with a given figure the diviner has thrown, the client listens carefully until she suddenly realises that an especially appropriate verse for her particular situation has been recited. At this point, she tells the diviner which verse it was and they proceed to interpret, then embody, the divinatory narrative by making the prescribed sacrifice. This West African form of divination, like that of the Tiv, and the Shona in Zimbabwe, is clearly interpretative but it is also highly interactive and dialogical in that it involves both diviner and client in the process of understanding.

In Momostenango, the highland Guatemalan K'iche' Mayan community in which I have conducted extensive field research, the terms ajk'ij, “keeper of the days,” and chuchkajaw, “mother-father,” designate the members of an organised group of diviners consisting of more than 20,000 women and men. They are recruited in classical shamanic fashion, including divine election—through birth, sickness and dreams—and their initiation involves a marriage to a spirit spouse.

The act of divination here combines the use of material objects—in this case, the hallucinogenic seeds of a tree (Erythrina corallodendron) and quartz crystals—with narratives centring on the interpretation of the days within the indigenous pre-Columbian calendar, together with a shamanic gift called coyopa, “sheet lightning,” which races through the diviner's body resulting in kacha' uqui’qu’el, “the speaking of the blood,” together with the confessions of the client (Tedlock 1992). In this divinatory system, since the body of the diviner is a microcosm with its own cardinal points, mountains, plains, lakes and winds, the intuitive embodied movements are interpreted according to their location, direction, and speed. The mapping of the meanings on to a human body proceeds according to sets of paired terms which are in a relationship of dialectical, interlocking complementarity rather than dualistic opposition. For the K'iche' Maya, it takes a combination of these various divinatory methods together with a discussion between a diviner and his or her client to arrive at proper ch’obonik, “understanding.” Each of these interlocking embodied iconic and narrative systems combines multidimensional inductive, intuitive and interpretative ways of knowing within a dialogical narrative in order to diagnose, to comfort, and to heal.

Conclusions

To this day, the state of our knowledge of the ethnography of divination is far worse than the conditions that led Dell Hymes nearly forty years ago to call for an ethnography of speaking (Hymes 1962). Unfortunately, the lack of such ethnography has not stopped scholars from attempting to explain away divination by placing it within evolutionist, diffusionist, ecological, or functionalist
theories. All of these approaches rationalise divination after the fact, totally removing it from the realm of intentionally effective action. As Anthony Wallace once observed, "It is generally agreed among most educated men that technological rituals [such as divination] are useless; that is to say, whatever effect they may have, it is not what was intended" (Wallace 1966, 171). Such a view opposes "subjectivity," which is the sole domain in which indigenous theories of divination are allowed to operate, to "objectivity," which is the domain of a researcher's explanations.

This strong dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity produces a neglect of the study of what Pierre Bourdieu called the practical mastery or practical knowledge and precludes altogether the development of a theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977, 4). When the researcher decides in advance that some actions are practical only in the so-called objective realm defined by himself or herself alone, he or she excludes from investigation the practical mastery involved in such arts as divination. It is true that a number of investigators, impressed by the apparent mechanicalness of a divinatory procedure or the orderliness which it may ascribe to the universe, have allowed divination an ancestral or at least an analogical relationship with Western science. This appears to give a diviner at least a tentative space within the so-called objective domain. However, this is only true to the degree that native theory and practice can be described as closely resembling that of the scientific investigator. Divinatory procedures such as the ones I have outlined here, which combine mechanical procedures with sudden bursts of intuition or insight, present instead a prime field for the investigation of practical mastery.

References Cited


**Biographical Note**

Barbara Tedlock trained in folklore at UC Berkeley with Alan Dundes. She received a master’s degree in Ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University and a Ph.D. in Anthropology at SUNY Albany. She is Professor of Anthropology and a Dean of Arts and Sciences at SUNY Buffalo.