Shells that Speak: Divination and Its Author

Knut Graw

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 19, Number 2-3, Fall/Winter 2024, pp. 199-211 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mrw.2024.a957211*

Shells that Speak: Divination and Its Author

KNUT GRAW
Friedrich-Alexander University

THE SETTING

Keita's house was located on a small unpaved road in Thiès, a calm and inviting city about sixty kilometers east of the bustling Senegalese capital of Dakar. Thiès's central area still reflects its colonial French urban grid of wide lanes lined with high-towering trees. The neighborhoods surrounding the center are more unassuming, consisting of smaller houses and residential family compounds often sporting a sandy courtyard surrounded by a wall of cement bricks. Keita's house had no courtyard, but a small, roofed terrace where we would later sit and talk about his work as a diviner. Although much smaller than Dakar, Thiès is no less diverse. Next to the many inhabitants belonging to the Serer, the ethnic group considered to be autochthonous to this part of Senegal, the city has attracted people from all over Senegal and its neighboring countries, especially Mali and Guinea. Keita had come from Guinea, too, and belonged to the Susu ethnic group. This had been no disadvantage in his work as a marabout-diviner, as people from Guinea and from the Mandinka-speaking areas of southern Senegal have the reputation of being very knowledgeable and experienced in the arts of divination and the making of protective amulets. Having lived in Senegal for many years, he could speak Wolof with his clients, as well Pulaar and Mandinka.

Thanks to the mediation of a friend who had consulted with him before, Keita had agreed to explain to me and teach me the art of divination with cowrie shells. On the first day of our collaboration, we first discussed a few details, especially my wish to assist at a number of consultations and record them on tape. We had met in the early morning and after an hour of friendly conversation he had told me to stay, as he was expecting a few clients this morning and because a few other people would perhaps come for consultation as well.

DOING AND LEARNING DIVINATION

The work with Keita had not been my first initiation into cowrie divination. I thought I knew how it worked from studying with another specialist in the Gambia, who had explained to me many of the important positions that regularly appear in the cast shells, but I was in for a surprise when the first consultation started. Not only did he use a much larger number of shells that made me wonder how he managed to collect them in one hand, but he also executed the casting movements with such a speed that I could not recognize any of the patterns that I had learned, nor could I see anything in the shells that would link up with what he told his client. While I had been confident that I would be able to understand what I would be witnessing, now I was at a loss. And I also remember that my skepticism was growing during that first session. Was he really reading anything in the shells, or was he just improvising interpretations while casting the shells? When we later discussed that first session and I asked him about how he was able to read the shells that fast, he sensed both my skepticism and the fact that I had some prior experience with this form of divination.

"You wonder what I am seeing in the shells that I can see a client's need? You wonder about what I do?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "It's too fast. I can't follow."

"Look," he said, "This is what I am doing." He quickly grasped the shells, held them for a moment in his hand, and then threw them on the floor with a swift movement, causing the shells to spread out on the dry surface of the colorful plastic mat on which we were sitting. There was a distinct brushing sound of shells clinking against each other combined with their gliding over of the flat weave structure of the plastic mat. Once the shells had come to a rest, he looked at the positions in which they had fallen and started to point out to me different patterns in the shells indicating possible areas of concern: an illness, a conflict, a worried mind, or un upcoming journey. In fact, Keita pointed out many of the patterns I had learned earlier. It was just that I had been unable to recognize them during the session because of the swiftness with which he had been handling the shells and because of the corresponding fast flow of his interpretations.

Later on I often remembered that lesson as a lesson in both artistry and modesty. A lesson in artistry concerning the level of skill ritual practitioners may develop in the execution of their art and a lesson in the modesty anthropologists may want to maintain as to the completeness of their understanding of those practices. However, his way of practicing cowrie shell divination had not only been surprisingly fast and skillful. It had been instructive for

another aspect as well—an aspect that is easily overlooked when getting immersed in the patterns of cowrie shells or initiated into the complexity of the use of other divinatory instruments. That is the question of the origin or source of the messages embedded in the multiple patterns emerging from divinatory procedure.

WHO IS SPEAKING?

What is important to understand when studying divination is that, despite the skill and knowledge of the diviners that is reflected in their practice and the central role their technical expertise plays in the divinatory encounter, the patterns or signs emerging in divination are not created by them. Looked at from an emic perspective, diviners read and interpret divinatory signs, but they are not their authors. Reflecting this, Mandinka-speaking diviners often introduce their readings with the short phrase *a koo*, "it says," indicating that the messages that they are pronouncing originate in the shells or others instruments they are using, rather than in their own minds. At the same time, however, diviners rarely go into any detail as to how precisely the shells can be considered as the source of the divinatory enunciation or what it is that is manifesting itself in them.

The same holds true for the source of other divinatory signs, be they the geomantic figures appearing on a sheet of paper, or the movements of a divining mat. If asked about this, geomantic specialists may refer to the mythical figure of the Angel Jibrīl (Gabriel), who is thought to have discovered and brought geomancy to the people in order to provide them with a way to inquire about the course of future and past events. This story is regularly seen as a sufficient explanation without necessarily implying that it is Jibrīl, God, or any other entity speaking through these signs.

Cowrie diviners, however, do sometimes offer more explanations in that context, although they may not necessarily mention anything about that to their clients. According to those diviners, cowrie shells are associated with the world of spirits. Generally, diviners rarely provide more details about this, but I was told several times that spirits feel attracted to cowrie shells because they are beautiful, smooth, and shiny, and perhaps the association of cowries as currency in precolonial times plays a role here, as well. The set of shells that I received from the first cowrie diviner I worked with at the end of my apprenticeship, for instance, had been soaked in the juice of crushed kola nuts and goat milk because these substances, too, are associated with the spirit realm. Because of those connections, kola nuts and goat milk, he told me, enhance the shells' divinatory power and as a result they would

serve me well without requiring any further procedures or preparations from me.[1]

Another diviner once told me, and I heard similar remarks later on from different individuals, that the practice of cowrie divination was not without risk for practitioners precisely because frequent dealing with objects in contact with the spirit realm may affect and harm the person without them noticing it at first and without them being able to fully control their influence. That may be difficult for an outside observer to understand, but it is a notion one encounters frequently, and both diviners and their clients may be aware of it. One of my hosts in the Gambia had long practiced cowrie divination alongside his job as a supervisor at a car repair shop, but he had eventually stopped divining because he had started to feel affected by it in a way he was not comfortable with, especially its influence on his sleep and his dreams. When he died in his early fifties two years later, several of his friends made reference to his use of the shells for divination as possibly having to do with his early death.

The observation that the work of ritual counseling may entail a health risk for practitioners can be found in many healing traditions. In Senegal and the Gambia, this risk is often associated with the relation of these practices with the spirit realm. At the same time, however, unsolicited explicit references to spirits by the practitioners I worked with were surprisingly rare and it was in this regard that Keita's way of divining stood out. While most of the diviners I worked with just focused on reading and interpreting the signs they saw, Keita regularly made reference to a spirit or jinn called Moussa (*jinni Moussa*) while reading the shells. And while making such references, he would regularly reach to his side, touching a white piece of cotton cloth behind him that was covering something that remained invisible throughout the consultation.

When I asked him about this later in our collaboration, and with no clients present, he lifted the piece of cloth for me. Underneath was a large enamel bowl filled with earth, into which a number of horns had been stuck, all of which were ornamented with cowrie shells. The whole ensemble was covered with a dark patina of dried blood. Up until now my research had focused on the tradition of maraboutic, that is, Islamic practices in Senegal and the Gambia, and not on the endogenous traditions of communities such as the Diola or Balant. These communities in many instances have kept their pre-Islamic traditions alive. Therefore an altar for the spirits, or, in this case for

1. There was no reference made to any spirit in particular, nor to a specific category, but we will later see that Keita's practice was more explicit in this regard.

one spirit, Moussa, and the signs of ritual blood sacrifices for this spirit, were a rare scene for me to encounter. In fact, I only saw it twice during my first two years of field work: once with Keita and another time with a diviner of Diola ethnic origin who had studied at a local Qur'anic center in the inland parts of the Casamance, south of the Gambia.

The fact that diviners with different ethnic and ritual backgrounds can make use of such sacrificial practices and still be seen as operating within the Islamic field has different reasons. One important reason is that the Islamic tradition accepts the existence of spirits referred to as jinn because they are explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, although communication with jinn for the purpose of gaining knowledge of the future was declared to have ended, according to Qur'an and Sunnah, with the advent of Islam.[2] However, and probably as a result of the Qur'anic acknowledgement of their existence, the association and use of spirits in divination continues in many parts of the Islamicate world despite this declared theological rupture with pre-Islamic practice.

Another reason why even blood sacrifices may not automatically disqualify a practitioner from operating with the Islamic field is the tendency of West African Muslim practitioners to understand pre-Islamic ideas of spirits in Islamic terms, and thus to integrate rather than deny them. This relatively open and integrating tendency of Islamic practice in Senegal and the Gambia is also reflected in the fact that the vernacular equivalents of the term "marabout" (such as *mooroo* in Mandinka or *serigne* in Wolof) are used as terms of address for Muslim ritual specialists regardless of their ethnic background, or degree of formal training in Arabic literacy or Muslim theology, as long as the practitioners in question consider themselves practicing within the Islamic field and declare that they adhere to it.[3] However, despite the large range of permissible ritual expressions in this context, altars and blood sacrifices are rare, if not exceptional. Reference to spirits, however, is much more common and the idea that the ritual messages originate in the divinatory apparatus and not in the mind of the diviner is an ethnographic constant.

LISTENING IN

The following excerpt from a divinatory consultation illustrates that the ritual's messages are understood to result from contacts beyond the shell caster. The vignette may also serve as a good example of the discursive

2. Compare Amira El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

3. Knut Graw, "Culture of Hope in West Africa," *ISIM Review* 16 (2005): 28–29.

dimension of cowrie divination. A young woman came to consult with Keita, a few weeks after an initial visit by her mother, who had sought Keita's advice because she had been worried about her daughter's recurring nightmares and her pregnancy. During that earlier consultation with the mother, after having consulted his shells, Keita had indicated specific sacrifices that the mother should make, consisting of an iron bracelet, seven meters of red poplin tissue, and a white cock, all of which she should offer in order to protect her daughter's pregnancy and to allow her to sleep. The purpose of the pregnant daughter's visit now was the acquisition of protection the in form of a talisman or gri-gri. Keita consulted the shells for her in order to find out about the current state of affairs and what to do. The client's reactions are preceded by a double indent; Keita's questions and statements appear without it. Keita first asked his client, who was in her mid-twenties, to silently pronounce her reason for coming for consultation onto a few of the shells, a crucial ritual gesture mostly referred to as the "pronunciation of intention" (Mandinka *ka nganiyo foo*)[4]. After that, each line corresponds to the reading of a new casting of the shells:

"What is your name?"

"Mariama Diop."[5]

"Mariama Diop. Okay. You pronounce your needs [onto the shells]. What Jinni Moussa will tell me, I will tell you."

"He says that in relation to your first question, you will have a long life."

"Concerning your second question, your star is in [the element of] water."

"Your first sacrifice consists of a mixed bracelet, half copper and half silver, which you will wear on your right arm. Good."

"Your second sacrifice consists of three white kola nuts and three candles. You pronounce your needs upon these sacrifices and keep them at your side during the night. In the morning you will give them to three men. You will give the candles to some begging students in the street."

4. This "pronunciation of intention" happens in silence so that the diviner cannot hear what the client wants to know or achieve. This is a gesture of high significance, both as a proof of the diviner's abilities (if he is subsequently able to address a client's concerns without explicit knowledge about them), and for the understanding of the phenomenological and existential quality of divinatory consultations in Senegal (see Knut Graw "Locating *Nganiyo*: Divination as Intentional Space," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 36, no. 1 (2006): 78–119.

5. A pseudonym. Note that to distinguish the voices of diviner and client, the speech of the latter is set off with a double indent.

"There is a marabout [in the shells]. You once went to a marabout in the past and he told you to sacrifice a white cock. You did that."[6]
"Another time you went to a diviner, who told you to sacrifice two white kola nuts and candles. You did that."
"No, no."
"He asks which of your two fiancés do you prefer?"
"Really?"
"Your hopes are always annihilated. What you hope for never realizes itself."
"All your possessions have come by surprise."
"All the men that come to see you, when they go home, they do not come back."
"Yes, that is what happens."
"He asks you to buy two meters of red poplin. Out of that you will make a night loincloth [that you will wear during sleep]. Agreed?"
"After that ... Have you recently dreamt of a man who appeared in your dream and who had sexual contact with you?"
"Yes."
"Until now that [experience] has not left you. Sometimes you wake up and you are in a very bad mood. You get angry with your entire family. Did that happen to you?"
"Yes, indeed."

This excerpt, and especially its opening, is remarkable for the Senegalese context as Keita makes explicit reference to a specific spirit with whom he says he communicates through the shells, making clear that what he reads in the shells is not his invention or interpretation, but represents the reading of messages authored by jinni Moussa. Such an explicit reference to a spirit as authoring agency is rare among diviners who inscribe themselves into the field of Islamic, "maraboutic" practice. However, all diviners I worked with would make their statements in the third person, making clear that the messages they convey are not their ideas or thoughts but what the shells convey. Among Mandinka-speaking diviners, this fact is reflected in the expression "a koo," "it says," which clarifies that the messages are what the shells say. This communication is not related to sound or voice but, according to my interlocutors, reflected in the positions and patterns of the cast shells.

Whether the idea that what speaks through the shells is a spirit, or several spirits, that can be generalized, is difficult to assess. On the one hand, I would

6. In order to avoid confusion, it is important to note that this kind of sacrifice is not conceptualized as a sacrifice for a spirit but as a charitable offering to be shared, for instance, among neighbors, referring to the Islamic practice of voluntary charity (Arabic *sadaqa*), referred to as *sadaa* in Mandinka and *sarax* in Wolof.

say that it is possible that the interlocutors are explicitly understood as spirits, insofar as there is a general association of cowrie shells with spirits. However, although the existence of jinn is confirmed by the Islamic tradition, communication with them for divination was prohibited from the very advent of Islam onwards, in explicit rupture with earlier, pre-Islamic practice.[7] Thus it is possible that the role of spirits in divination became less emphasized the more these practices were adopted and adapted in a sociocultural environment which questions precisely the legitimacy of communicating with spirits in divination and elsewhere. Even if divinatory practices like cowry divination were not Islamic in origin and in other contexts commonly associated with ancestral spirits or endogenous divinities, a crucial mechanism of their adaptation may rely on abstracting such practices out from their pre-Islamic cosmologies, that is, their spirits. The fact that other forms of divination, such as geomancy, for instance, regularly operate without being associated with spirits shows that the authoring function of the divination complex can indeed be conceived in more abstract terms, independent of a spirit referent. The whole question is further complicated when considered in comparative and historical terms, as the cultural history of divination abounds with references to spirits and divinities. The main question remains: who, in the end, speaks through the shells? What is the source of the divinatory enunciation?

THE QUESTION OF THE SOURCE OF THE DIVINATORY ENUNCIATION

Despite the frequent reference to the authoring role of spirits or the divinatory apparatus itself, theoretical discussions of divination and authorship in the anthropological literature on Senegal or other West African contexts are surprisingly rare. One of the exceptions is an article by Andras Zempléni, who discusses this question in the context of Senoufo divination. Zempléni argues that the relegation of authorship to the oracle[8] is a crucial "pragmatic property" of divination, allowing for the "ritual demonstration of the human speaker's evacuation as the subject from the (divinatory) enunciation."[9]

7. El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, 53–69.

8. I am using the term oracle here in the widest sense, referring to the divinatory instrument or objects, the divinatory signs produced by or perceived in them, and the possible entities or forces considered to be communicating through them. In the context of mediumship or possession rituals, this would also encompass the medium or possessed person and the entity speaking through them.

9. Andras Zempléni, "How to Say Things with Assertive Acts? About Some Pragmatic Properties of Senoufo Divination," in ed. Gilles Bibeau and Ellen E. Corin,

In an earlier article, I discuss the tension that arises between the recognition of the authoring role of the oracle in divination as a pragmatic property and the ontological claims entailed in these emic conceptualizations.[10] Viewing the oracle's authorship as an assertive, pragmatic function of divination, allowing the diviner to create an objective, and thus more authoritative, outside source for the enunciation than voicing personal opinions, necessarily involves the bracketing of ontological claims entailed in emic conceptualizations of oracular authorship.

Bracketing is good phenomenological practice, going back to Husserlian phenomenology and the notion of *epoché*, and does not necessarily involve the dismissal of an ontology which entails a claim to the actual existence of what is considered to be communicating through the oracle, such as spirits or divinities. Strictly speaking, bracketing only means that the evaluation of these claims remains suspended. However, focusing on their pragmatic function may nevertheless prevent us from reading them as providing insights into the meaning of divination that may reach beyond the associated ontological claims towards something that is perhaps not made explicit, but which is reflected in them.

In other words, bracketing endogenous ontologies may prevent us from seeing that these ontologies are not just models of physical reality, but epistemologically and hermeneutically meaningful statements in their own right. Meaningfulness here does not necessarily imply the actual existence or belief in the existence of the entities assumed to be activated in the oracle. Zempléni rightly points out that, although "he who 'speaks' by means of words and divinatory signs, that is the subject of the enunciation, is a transcendent being as the Earth, the Earth-spirits, the Spider, or the Fox, such and such god or genie, ancestor, and so on," it is not necessary for the practitioners or their clients to believe in such entities and he gives examples of divinatory traditions that work without any such claims.[11] Rather, meaningfulness refers to

Beyond Textuality: Asceticism and Violence in Anthropological Interpretation (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), 241.

10. Knut Graw, "Beyond Expertise: Specialist Agency and the Autonomy of the Divinatory Ritual Process," *Africa* 79, no. 1 (2009): 92–109.

11. Zempléni, "How to Say Things with Assertive Acts," 241–42, with references. Following this line of thought, it seems that the association with spirits or belief in such entities is not strictly necessary for divination to work, as long as the divinatory procedure or oracle itself is considered to be the primary source of the divinatory enunciation. Concerning the question of the working and efficacy of divination in a specific sociocultural environment, it is worth noting that, for the consultant, existential concerns and their examination through divination are much more important than

the possibility that emic claims concerning the authorship of the oracle may provide insights into the phenomenological and anthropological nature of divination that cannot be perceived if reduced to a pragmatic function. What may appear as an ontology may, in fact, not only reflect an attempt to describe the nature of the physical world, but also entail insights into the nature of that reality, which can be translated in phenomenological and anthropological terms. These terms range from different modes of interrelation between things, things and persons, and between persons, through intricate epistemologies of the body, the soul, and the psyche, to elaborate models of sociality, reciprocity, and ethics within a given sociocultural context.[12]

Looking at it in such a way allows us to see that divinatory messages do indeed emerge from the oracular or divinatory system, which is not a random procedure. Instead, such a system both draws on and contributes to a complex, semiotic repository of existential insights—both historically sedimented and dynamic—that diviners tap into, but which they have neither invented nor fully control. It is here that the seemingly randomized procedures that characterize so many forms of divination show their full significance, always already transcending any given practitioner's individual expertise.[13]

In other words, the oracle or divinatory instrument is not simply the source of the enunciation, but a source of possible understandings of a person's lived reality. The source is activated and becomes generative once tapped into by the diviner through a specific ritualized procedure. For example, the casting of shells in the case of cowrie divination or the calculation and drawing of divinatory signs in the case of geomancy engages the divinatory complex. Thus we can see that it is indeed the shells (or the spirit or other forces expressing themselves through them) that speak through the patterns and

---

the etiology, theology, or history of a particular divinatory technique. Not surprisingly, most of the time consultants have little interest in questions such as why a diviner is able to arrive at insights concerning their situation, let alone the ontological status of spirits. What really counts in the perception of the consultant is that the diviner is able to successfully address their concerns and point out ritual measures to safeguard or improve further developments. In this regard, divination is not just an epistemic or cognitive, but foremost an existential and hermeneutic praxis (Knut Graw, "Divination and Islam: Existential Perspectives in the Study of Ritual and Religious Praxis in Senegal and Gambia," in ed. Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec, *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion* (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 17–32.

12. Of course, endogenous ontologies may be true also in a physical sense, but the fact that this is usually impossible to evaluate within the framework provided by the social sciences is precisely the reason why this question is (at least temporarily) bracketed in ethnographic anthropological accounts.

13. Graw, "Beyond Expertise," 92–109.

signs, which can then be read and interpreted. In this regard, the shells or other oracle tools form an intermediary between the diviner and the client that is encountered as objective, impersonal, and unbiased because the interpretative categories and insights stored in them predate everything that follows and, when tapped into, generate divinatory signs or messages in a way that cannot be predicted, but must be read and interpreted by the diviner. Although this process has to be put into motion by the diviner through a learned and often ritualized procedure, the divinatory signs are thus not produced, but manifest themselves in a seemingly autonomous way as a result of that procedure.

Once we realize that the semiotic process underlying forms of divination such as cowrie divination or geomancy always remains partly autonomous from both the diviner and the client, it becomes understandable why the oracle is attributed agency, authorship, and efficacy: the oracle is imbued with authorship precisely because in normal, interpersonal discourse—based on acts of speech, gestures, or writing—meaningful communication cannot be understood without assuming an active, enunciating subject. In other words, something that speaks inevitably reflects agency, too. And because messages, speech, and agency are what we associate first of all with the persons we encounter in daily life from our births onwards, the source of such speech, messages, and agency has to be personified. It cannot be otherwise. As the oracle has agency, it must also have a voice and vice versa, attributes emerging and reflected in the divinatory encounter in the form of direct appellations, ritual speech, and gestures, and materializing itself in ritual objects and spatial arrangements such as animal horns and altars, even if concealed from view, and—not in Senegal or the Gambia—but in many other cultural settings across the globe, figurines and sculptures.

Once the presence of ritual speech and oracular objects are recognized as expressions of the agentive nature of the divinatory semiotic system, we start to understand why oracular praxis, in Senegal and elsewhere, is often associated with spirits. In divination, the spirit is the enunciation. Or, put another way, spirits are not just expressions of a particular worldview or part of a cultural ontology, but emerge as a function of the divinatory enunciation. In such a view, the spirit is to the oracle what the person is to speech.

The need to personify the source from which a divinatory message originates does not necessarily imply anthropomorphizing or deification (although many religious traditions involve both, sometimes with the effect of forbidding divination as idolatry). Spirits can take on many shapes and, depending upon the specific cultural context, be identified with plants, animals, stones, landscapes, or natural elements such as water or fire. These possibilities for

identification give rise to worldviews and ontologies that span from perceptions of the world which traditionally were referred to as animistic (from the Latin *anima*, soul or spirit) to complex polytheistic pantheons, all of which can appear with different degrees of hybridization. While jinn are often conceptualized as figures with human-like features and interests, in Mandinka, they may also be referred to in much more transitory and ephemeral terms as "wind" (*fonyoo*). The expression is not metaphorical, but rather leaves the precise nature of what is referred to open and unexpressed to a degree that its association with spirits may be rather tenuous, almost nonconceptualized by and nonexistent for the individual speaker.[14]

DIVINATION AS ENUNCIATION

As we have seen, the tenuous character of the spirit referent in Senegalese cowrie divination, its more general absence in geomancy (*ramalu*), and the simultaneous emphasis on the authoring role of the cowries or geomantic signs, encapsulated in the frequently heard phrase, "it says" (*a koo*), in divinatory consultations, complicate the question of the nature and origin of the divinatory enunciation. Rather than transmission by a single source through other media, meaning is built by oscillating between and through the shells, their agency—whether reflecting an active involvement of or reference to spirits or not—and the readings pronounced by the diviner. Two points are crucial here. First, it is important to realize that the enunciation is not identical to what diviners say, precisely because they are not seen as its source. And second, the enunciation is not identical to the signs emerging in divinatory procedure, precisely because they usually do not manifest themselves directly, but have to be read and interpreted by the diviner.

Distinguishing, thus, between cowrie shells as a kind of object-entity, the meaning they transmit as signs, and the importance of the diviner as the person reading and interpreting them for the client, we also start to understand

14. This is not to suggest that divination practices lie at the origin of all "beliefs in spiritual beings" and, thus, to speak with Edward B. Tylor, at the basis of all religions, and it is obvious that the very question of such an origin has been disputed since the decline of cultural evolutionism as a scientific paradigm. However, given the extension of divinatory practices, both geographically and historically, and the necessity to somehow 'animate' the sources of oracular messages, the practice of divination possibly would have formed an equally valid argument for forming the root of "all historic development of religion" (Charles L. Henning, "On the Origin of Religion," *American Anthropologist* 11, no. 12 (1898): 373–82, 374) as Julius Lippert's postulation of the "worship of the soul," or Herbert Spencer's idea of "ancestor worship (being) the root of every religion" (Henning, ibid., with references).

why different consultations may differ in the way they unfold and why different techniques can be applied in different ways by different diviners. First, divinatory signs, their material support, and the possible reference to and actions of entities such as spirits who speak through those signs give occasion for variation of specific ritual techniques of divinatory consultation. Second, the same variability that characterizes divination's many different forms can also be observed in individual diviners' ways of reading the signs and communicating their meaning to their clients. This leads to, third, a ritualized setting in which divinatory enunciations all resemble each other in terms of their unfolding and main characteristics but will nevertheless differ in their individual form, content, and style of articulation.

Given the outlined ternary or three-dimensional structural dynamic of divination, we also understand how it is possible that certain dimensions may be more emphasized than others and why others may almost disappear, depending upon the form of divination being used. This variability becomes even more pronounced as one moves through different cultural traditions or historical contexts. Even in forms of divination, in which no external instruments or procedures are used, where the oracle expresses itself through the body of the divining person as a medium, this still holds true, as long as we recognize mediumship as a transposition of the external authoring role of the oracle into the body of the medium. Rituals of divination resemble each other in their modalities, wherever and whenever we find them, because of the interplay of these different dimensions—divinatory signs, diviners' interpretations, and the culturally specific instantiations of the first two—as long as the divinatory enunciation comes from a system of signs or a signifying body that is conceived as being independent of the diviners themselves.