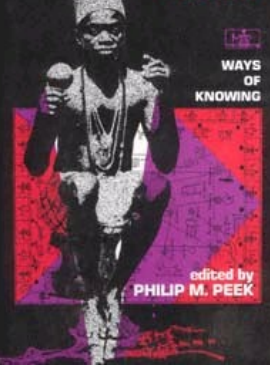


**AFRICAN DIVINATION
SYSTEMS**



WAYS
OF
KNOWING

edited by
PHILIP M. PEEK

African Divination Systems

African Systems of Thought

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African Divination Systems

Ways of Knowing

Edited by Philip M. Peek



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To William Bascom

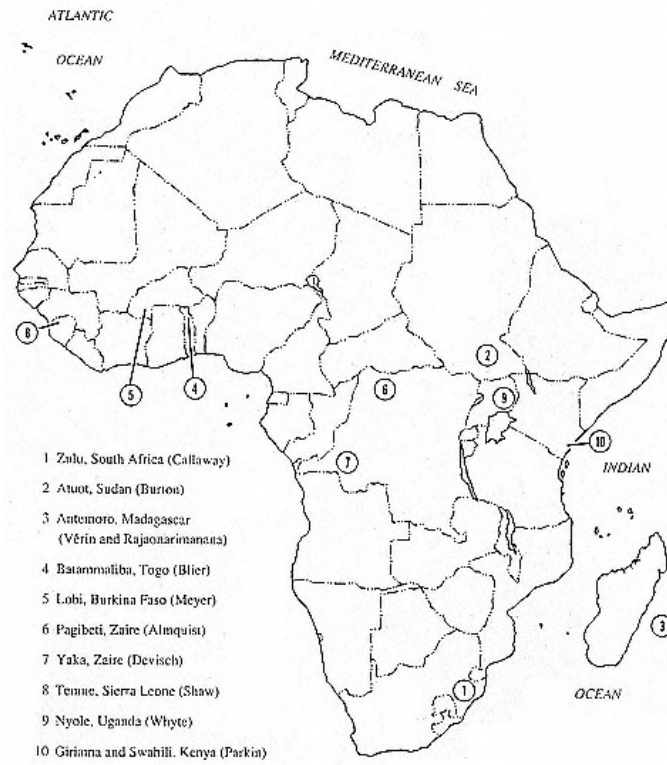
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Political map of Africa showing location of peoples whose divination systems are highlighted, with authors in parentheses.

INTRODUCTION

THE STUDY OF DIVINATION, PRESENT AND PAST

Philip M. Peek

Every human community recognizes a need for the special knowledge gained through divination. While this need is hardly of the same order as the need for food and shelter, it is nonetheless universal. Murdock, for instance, includes divination among the features found "in every culture known to history or ethnography" (1945:124).

Prometheus's gift of fire to humankind is well known, but his gift of the arts of divination has almost been forgotten, even though his name, meaning "forethought," reflects the importance of this contribution to Greek culture (Oswalt 1969:249–51). Other great civilizations have granted similar prominence to divination. Anthologies by Caquot and Leibovici (1968) and Loewe and Blacker (1981) include contributions on divination's critical role not only in the classical world but also in the Americas, India, Tibet, Japan and China, Africa, ancient Egypt and the Middle East, Judaism and Islam, and the Germanic world.

Although divination practices continue worldwide, remarkably little research has been done on these systems of knowledge, including those in Africa, the focus of this collection. Mbiti's observation remains valid: "With few exceptions, African systems of divination have not been carefully studied, though diviners are found in almost every community" (1970:232).

Ways of Knowing

Foremost among the concerns which shaped this volume is that, given the pivotal role of divination in African cultures, the study of divination systems must assume a central position in our attempts to better understand African peoples today. ¹ As will be demonstrated, the sheer volume of information gained from recent thorough investigations of these systems reveals how much knowledge we lost as a result of earlier prejudices against divination. Throughout Africa—whether in

the city or in the country, no matter the religion, sex, or status of the individual—questions, problems, and choices arise for which everyday knowledge is insufficient and yet action must be taken. The information necessary to respond effectively is available, but often only through a diviner. That is why divination continues to provide a trusted means of decision making, a basic source of vital knowledge.

A divination system is a standardized process deriving from a learned discipline based on an extensive body of knowledge. This knowledge may or may not be literally expressed during the interpretation of the oracular message. The diviner may utilize a fixed corpus, such as the Yoruba Ifa Odu verses, or a more diffuse body of esoteric knowledge. Divining processes are diverse, but all follow set routines by which otherwise inaccessible information is obtained. Some type of device usually is employed, from a simple sliding object to the myriad symbolic items shaken in diviners' baskets. Sometimes the diviner's body becomes the vehicle of communication through spirit possession. Some diviners operate self-explanatory mechanisms that reveal answers; other systems require the diviner to interpret cryptic metaphoric messages. The final diagnosis and plan for action are rendered collectively by the diviner and the clients(s).

Divination sessions are not instances of arbitrary, idiosyncratic behavior by diviners. A divination system is often the primary institutional means of articulating the epistemology of a people. Much as the classroom and the courtroom are primary sites for the presentation of cultural truths in the United States, so the diviner in other cultures is central to the expression and enactment of his or her cultural truths as they are reviewed in the context of contemporary realities. The situating of a divination session in time and space, the cultural artifacts utilized (objects, words, behaviors), the process of social interaction, and the uses made of oracular knowledge all demonstrate the foundations of a people's world view and social harmony. Divination systems do not simply reflect other aspects of a culture; they are the means (as well as the premise) of knowing which underpin and validate all else. Contemporary Africans in both urban and rural environments continue to rely on divination, and diviners play a crucial role as mediators, especially for cultures in rapid transition.

A second concern of the shapers of this volume was that African divination research had become lost in an almost exclusively functionalist mode, which assumed the practice to be at best simply supportive of other social systems and at worst irrational and detrimental to its adherents. Every study presented here emphatically demonstrates the centrality of divination. Divination systems are not simply closed ideologies founded on religious beliefs but are dynamic systems of knowledge upon which the proper ordering of social action is based. Looking at these systems from this standpoint, we begin to understand why divination is so often chosen over other means of decision making.

We intend this volume to contribute to current discussions in comparative epistemology and the anthropology of knowledge, cross-cultural psychology and cognition studies, and semiotics and ethnosience as well as to religious studies and more traditional anthropological topics. Although divination systems are not solely manifestations of religious beliefs, a sacred world view is nonetheless a key ele-

ment. It is virtually impossible to discuss social interaction, self-identity, and cognitive process in an African context without consideration of divination, especially diviner-client interaction and the modes of analysis employed. Political and sociological studies of African societies need to recognize the role of divination systems in the enactment and validation of African legal systems and political structures. Investigation of a divination complex reveals a wealth of historical data in divinatory texts, esoteric terminology, and diviner's paraphernalia. Because many diviners are also herbalists, their diagnostic and treatment methods can aid the study of traditional healing systems. No aspect of life is *not* touched by divination, and so the process becomes critical to any study of African cultures and peoples.

With our emphasis on divination as a system of knowledge in action, we are reminded that our scientific tradition is but one way of knowing and that we can gain much from other systems proven effective over the centuries. African divination systems involve a combination of (as we commonly label cognitive processes) "logical-analytical" and "intuitive-synthetical" modes of thinking, while in the European tradition the separation of these modes is rigidly maintained.

In addition, the European tradition tends to characterize the diviner as a charismatic charlatan coercing others through clever manipulation of esoteric knowledge granted inappropriate worth by a credulous and anxiety-ridden people. Instead, we have found diviners to be men and women of exceptional wisdom and high personal character. The critical input of the divinatory congregation, especially that of the consulter/adviser and the particularizing discussions between diviner and client(s), serves to demythologize the domineering diviner image. By approaching divination as a dynamic, determining process, we are no longer limited to simple product analysis of the divinatory diagnosis.

Another guiding principle of the contributors to this book was to provide an overview of sub-Saharan African cultures and contemporary divination scholarship. The contributions are based on extensive fieldwork among peoples from Burkina Faso, Kenya, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, and Zaire. Not only do these studies provide new theoretical approaches to a variety of divination systems; they also present much new ethnographic material, including several divination forms never described previously. While we hope that this anthology will aid in focusing future research on divination, we did not attempt to confine it to a single analytical approach. Most contributions, nonetheless, are in concert with what Devisch (1985) terms internal, semiotic and semantic, and praxeological approaches. Therefore, despite the diversity of peoples, divination systems, scholars, and academic orientations represented, a number of significant common points emerge to unify the collection.

Although each essay discusses numerous aspects of a divination system, the essays are grouped to enhance their major contributions, and section introductions provide brief analytic and comparative commentaries to highlight the groupings. The first section, as a kind of prelude to the whole volume, is devoted to one of the earliest recorded accounts of the process of becoming a diviner. Taken from Henry Callaway's classic ethnographical study, *The Religious System of the Amazulu*, it describes a future diviner's experiences and the cultural institutions

which validate and channel them. Further data on the selection and training of African diviners are found throughout the volume.

The two essays constituting the second section provide comparative regional studies of divination as a search for knowledge. First is John W. Burton's analysis of divination among the Nilotic peoples of the Sudan, especially the Atuat, for whom divination provides the primary interpretation of their experience and the source of their philosophy. Pierre Vérin and Narivelo Rajaonarimanana, using archival and field material, then discuss the development and diffusion of the Antemoro divination system in Madagascar and the influence of Arabic divination on African systems.

The third section focuses on divination as the major—often the sole—expression of a social system and the means of maintaining its governing norms; in other words, the social system exists *through* divination. Rudolph Blier describes the central role of the diviner-consultant in the health care system of the Batammaliba of northern Togo, from selection and training to diagnostic practice. Piet Meyer presents the divination system of the Lobi from Burkina Faso, who are totally dependent on the suprahuman powers revealed only through divination. The next two essays, although both deal with Zairean peoples, reveal very different divination systems. Alden Almquist, in the context of the Pagibeti culture and hunting ethos, analyzes the criteria employed to choose among divinatory mechanisms. René Devisch demonstrates how the divination system of the Yaka, while determining the causes of their misfortunes, also maintains their social structure, especially aspects of matrilineal inheritance and ascent.

The fourth group of essays is primarily concerned with how knowledge and truth are generated by the special sensibilities of divination and then subjected to the cooperative, transformational interaction of diviner and client(s) through the full divinatory process. Rosalind Shaw critiques the imposition of European rationality on other cultures' systems of knowledge and analyzes the construction of truth through the "authorizing process" of divination among the Temne of Sierra Leone. Susan Reynolds Whyte discusses the ways in which divination, through control of oracular knowledge by the consulter/adviser, defines social relationships between Nyole men and women of Uganda. David Parkin's study of the oracular speech of the Giriama and Swahili diviners of Kenya demonstrates how these *bricoleurs* transform the confusion of simultaneous events into a comprehensible sequencing of significant factors.

My own contribution in the fifth section proposes a way to understand the diverse symbolic elements and the unique cognitive process of these systems of knowledge. This analysis suggests that the divinatory enterprise establishes a non-normal mode of cognition through the manipulation of cultural symbols of anomalousness, liminality, and inversion in order to receive non-normal communication, which is then mediated by diviner and client(s) to permit effective practical response.

James W. Fernandez provides a final overview in which he analyzes the evocative and efficacious ways in which "figuring out" takes place in divination through the critical roles of metaphoric speech and primary process knowing, which the

diviner then synthesizes with secondary process knowing to determine the client's plan of action. Fernandez's personal reflection on the nature and value of divination among African peoples provides an apt conclusion to the volume.

Background to the Study of Divination

Because European and American scholarship has granted divination only marginal status in human affairs and presumed it to be magical in nature, one must glean those factors which have affected divination research from broader discussions of religion. In the later nineteenth century, several prominent themes, including evolutionism and secularism, shaped anthropology's approach to non-European belief systems; but most influential was positivism, which accepted only verifiable observations as "truths" and automatically denied any ideas of religious or esthetic causality.² These ideologies, coupled with the "moral crisis" of the times (Evans-Pritchard 1965:100–101; Langness 1987:11–12) and the urgency to be more "scientific" in all endeavors, hardly promoted the sensitive study of non-European religions.

In *Primitive Cultures*, Tylor simply enumerates myriad divinatory methods which "survive" only as games of chance (1958, vol. 1:78–83, 119–33). Clearly "Mr. Tylor's Science" had little tolerance for the arts of divination anywhere; he completely ignores contemporary European use of divination. Other early anthropologists, including Frazer, Malinowski, and Radcliffe-Brown, offer nothing on divination. Although Fortune records much on Dobo divination (1963), he defines divination as "a method of arriving at a judgment of the unknown through a consideration of incomplete evidence" (1921:174). I will discuss the persistence of this attitude in England in my review of Evans-Pritchard and the British social anthropologists.

Outside strictly academic circles at the turn of the century, other scholars reflected ambivalence about divination. Henri Junod, a missionary whose research on the Thonga appeared in 1989, allows that "the Bantu mind" has invented an extremely comprehensive and responsive divination system: ". . . the art of bone-throwing is by no means child's play, nor mere quackery by which astute soothsayers deceive their credulous followers" (1927:568). Nevertheless, he concludes: "I am convinced that, however high the degree of astuteness engendered by the divinatory bones may be, they have been extremely detrimental to the intellectual and moral welfare of the Natives" (572). A fellow missionary in southern Africa, Henry Callaway, while agreeing about divination's effectiveness, did not accept Junod's final evaluation (see section I).

The status of divination study in France was not as dire as in England, but one might have expected more attention to be paid to the topic.³ The philosopher Lévy-Bruhl concluded that divination works for its practitioners but on the basis of a type of logic different from that of educated Europeans (1966); he thereby erroneously excluded "the mystical in our own culture as rigorously as he excluded the empirical in savage cultures," according to Evans-Pritchard (1965:91). Durk-

heim's approach to religion as a system of ideas and values that could be studied objectively presents a far more sympathetic perspective than had developed in England. In fact, Durkheim and Mauss singled out divination as a core area for research as early as 1903:

There is nothing more natural, moreover, than the relation thus expressed between divination and the classification of things. Every divinatory rite, however simple it may be, rests on a pre-existing sympathy between certain beings, and on a traditionally admitted kinship between a certain sign and a certain future event. Further, a divinatory rite is generally not isolated; it is part of an organized whole. The science of the diviners, therefore, does not form isolated groups of things, but binds these groups to each other. At the basis of a system of divination there is thus, at least implicitly, a system of classification. (1967:77)

The tragic loss of Durkheim and most of his students during and shortly after World War I greatly disrupted the development of French ethnology. Still, it is curious that Griaule and his colleagues did not emphasize Dogon divination more than they did, especially given Griaule's concern with "typical" modes of knowledge (Clifford 1983). Although both Griaule (1937) and Paulme (1937) wrote on divination and one of the group's major publications, *The Pale Fox*, is named after the divining agent itself, Dogon divination never performed the organizing function for their research that it could have. As Douglas notes, "The technique [of divination] was well demonstrated, but only by the use of hypothetical examples. They neither knew how the Dogon used it to solve *their* dominant preoccupations, *nor* how to use it to solve their *own* problems as investigators" (1979:137).⁴ Nevertheless, major studies of divination systems were published by Trautmann (1940), Maupoil (1943), and Delachaux (1946). More recently, important research has been pursued by Retel-Laurentin (1969) and Adler and Zempléni (1972) (see Devisch 1985).

Surprisingly, the broad theoretical orientation of American cultural anthropologists did not encourage consideration of divination; their studies of traditional religions barely touch the topic. Evans-Pritchard suggests that Americans ignored religious systems because they were primarily concerned with the emotions of religious activity (1965:38–39).⁵ An intellectual atmosphere similar to that which stifled divination study in England evidently predominated in the United States, as illustrated by Lessa and Vogt's characterization of divination as mere coin flipping—a description they have left unchanged since the first edition of their anthology over thirty years ago (1979:333). Little work was done by American anthropologists on the topic until Bascom began to publish his lifelong research on the Ifa divination system of the Yoruba (1941). Although Bascom avoided theoretical pronouncements, the extent of his work surely indicated the value of studying divination systems. Gebauer (1964), Moore (1979), Park (1967), Fernandez (1967), and Bohannan (1975) published significant analytical studies, but a cohesive body of research never developed. Fernandez's afterword to this volume offers an honest self-appraisal of the attitudes toward divination held at that time.⁶ Even with the development of ethno-science, such epistemologies as manifest in divination sys-

tems were not approached; nor have the fields of symbolic and cognitive anthropology turned to this topic, although the Colbys' recent work on Maya divination (1981) and Daniel's on Tamil divination (1984:chap. 5) may signal a change.

The Influence of Evans-Pritchard

Returning to England to review the work of Evans-Pritchard and the British social anthropologists, we will gain a better insight into the absence of extensive study of African divination systems. Evans-Pritchard's influential *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, published in 1937, was the first serious treatment of divination; it, along with his other writings, confronts several theoretical issues in the study of non-European religions. Here we can only comment on a few key issues raised in his phenomenological study of Zande divination and discussions of the dichotomization of religion and rationality by anthropologists.⁷

Evans-Pritchard's critique of the biases affecting the study of religion is found throughout his writings; the argument was formed rather early (Douglas 1981). In the introduction to *Nuer Religion*, he addresses the most basic problem:

So strong has been rationalist influence on anthropology that religious practices are often discussed under the general heading of ritual together with a medley of rites of quite a different kind, all having in common only that the writer regards them as irrational; while religious thought tends to be inserted into a general discussion of values. Here the view is taken that religion is a subject of study *sui generis*, just as are language or law. (1967:viii)

Religion has to be studied as a system, and Evans-Pritchard stresses that the ethnographer's religious orientation is critical, "for even in a descriptive study judgement can in no way be avoided" because those who "give assent" to religious beliefs write differently than those who do not (1967:vii).⁸ He cites anthropologists' aggressive agnosticism as the cause of the fundamental skepticism encountered in the study of African religions (and thus of divination). Most anthropologists were raised in strongly religious homes,⁹ but as adults they became atheists or agnostics for whom religion was an illusion (Evans-Pritchard 1965:15). Why then did they persist in the study of religion?

They sought, and found, in primitive religions a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity. If primitive religion could be explained away as an intellectual aberration, as a mirage induced by emotional stress, or by its social function, it was implied that the higher religions could be discredited and disposed of in the same way. (Evans-Pritchard 1967:15)¹⁰

The cultural event which generated so much of Evans-Pritchard's soul searching and later debate among others¹¹ was the poison oracle of the Azande of southern Sudan, which involves the administration of poison to a chicken whose subsequent behavior provides a response to the matter under investigation (Evans-Pritchard

1968:281–312). A series of propositions are presented after the chicken has been poisoned; for example, "If such is the case, poison oracle kill [or spare] the fowl." The chicken's movements and fate—whether or not it dies—are interpreted in relation to the continuous questioning. "The main duty of the questioner," Evans-Pritchard points out, "is to see that the oracle fully understands the question put to it and is acquainted with all facts relevant to the problem it is asked to solve. They address it with all the care for detail that one observes in court cases before a prince" (297). The oracle thus serves to establish accountability, to determine the cause (usually witchcraft) of misfortune.

After describing several sessions, Evans-Pritchard develops a lengthy interrogation of the Azande poison oracle from every imaginable angle (313–51). Although the unidentified skeptic with whom he debates might be his English audience or possibly Lévy-Bruhl, one cannot avoid the impression that the debate is ultimately internal. ¹² Evans-Pritchard assures us that while there are Zande skeptics and manipulators, Zande religion is not only internally consistent and rational but "Zande Man" constantly makes self-interested utilitarian use of his oracles in order to respond to witchcraft. To reach such conclusions, Evans-Pritchard has to distinguish between the "mystical" and the "objective" in Zande thought and argue that the Zande kept the two realms separate. He believes that Malinowski and Durkheim erred in portraying the operation of the magical world in the world of the practical (or the sacred in the profane) because each world follows its own rules. ¹³ This position parallels Evans-Pritchard's criticism of agnostics for turning "theological" facts into "sociological" facts in the study of religion. But his inability to appreciate that other peoples may not share the rigid European dichotomization of science and religion and may utilize different modes of thought, often in alternating fashion, is exactly what has generated much criticism today. ¹⁴ Later we shall argue that Evans-Pritchard's analysis fails specifically because divination makes definite use of both modes of thinking.

Finally, Evans-Pritchard seems to have wearied in his defense of the Azande; by the end of his discourse on the poison oracle he observes that further formulation of Zande beliefs would simply "expose their hollowness" (347). Reflecting his own positivist stance (reminiscent of Junod's conclusions), he writes:

Their blindness is not due to stupidity, for they display great ingenuity in explaining away the failures and inequalities of the poison oracle and experimental keenness in testing it. It is due rather to the fact that their intellectual ingenuity and experimental keenness are conditioned by patterns of ritual behavior and mystical belief. Within the limits set by these patterns they show great intelligence, but it cannot operate beyond these limits. (338)

What a difference if he had only allowed at this point that this description could apply to most individuals in any culture!

Evans-Pritchard maintains that the anthropologist should only describe not explain religion—"his problems are scientific, not metaphysical or ontological" (1965:

17). Nevertheless, at the end of *Theories of Primitive Religion* he quotes Bergson extensively on the instinctual nature of religious behavior and, although he is critical, the prominence of place suggests agreement and continues an argument he presented earlier.¹⁵ This stance is consistent with his understanding of societies as moral systems. Perhaps finally Evans-Pritchard's colleagues and students only heard his questioning of the poison oracle's logic. They certainly did not join in his agonizing introspection and in the end Evans-Pritchard considered himself alone in perceiving these dilemmas in the study of religion (1966:170).

British anthropologists continued to study African religions despite Evans-Pritchard's warnings, but it was always clear *how* religion was being approached, as Middleton's first line in his preface to *Lugbara Religion* indicates: "This book does not seek to present Lugbara religion as a system of theology, but to make a sociological analysis of the place of ritual and belief in Lugbara social life" (1964:v).¹⁶ British anthropologists were primarily concerned with the relationship of witchcraft to social systems, following as they did Evans-Pritchard's conclusion that witchcraft accusations were means of adjusting social relationships and allocating responsibility.¹⁷ Their publications constitute a formidable body of scholarship on witchcraft, but it developed at the expense of research on other aspects of religion (divination is only marginally treated¹⁸) and the consideration of religions as systems (see Kuper 1985:138–39). It is extraordinary that so much attention could be devoted to witchcraft and so little to divination, especially when it is still the only means of detecting witchcraft for many African peoples. Ironically, British (and other) anthropologists have produced study after study which simply offer "then the matter was decided by a diviner" and nothing more. In fact, the basic research guide *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* makes only two brief references to divination in nearly four hundred pages of advice to fieldworkers. Studies of divination appeared occasionally, of course; but even Turner, whom we can praise for his insights into Ndembu basket divination, never attended a divination session (Werbner 1972:231).

Although British social anthropologists working in Africa produced significant studies of religion, religion (and thereby divination because it was considered only in its spiritual dimensions)—was portrayed as derivative of the social system, primarily understood through kinship and government. And if religious belief and practice "worked" (by supporting kinship structure, allowing emotional release, and so on), then it did not matter whether religion was "logical."

But even more striking is the number of British anthropologists who treated divination with great derision. "When he divined for me, I deliberately misled him," Lienhardt writes (1970:69). Beattie informs us that the diviner was well aware that "he was simply putting on an act" (1967a:64). Fortes characterizes divination as "the game" (1966:421), while Middleton refers to a spirit-possessed diviner's speech as "gibberish" (1971:271). And Parrinder cannot-believe that anything is revealed by divination's "haphazard methods" (1976:122). Unless we also accept similarly contentious characterizations of polygynous marriages or initiation ceremonies as a legitimate part of the ethnographic literature on African

cultures, we must question why these mocking comments about divination exist at all. One is forced to recall Evans-Pritchard's critical observations.

Another theme emerged in Britain which contributed to the limitations of divination studies. Whether as a defensive response to the French ethnologists' revelations of complex African cosmologies or as an independently developed position, British anthropologists did not accept the existence of coherent, autonomous systems of knowledge in Africa. As Forde states in the introduction to *African Worlds*, "there need be no complete integration of belief and doctrine, still less the domination of conduct in all spheres by a single system of beliefs or basic ideas" (1963: vii). A "nationalistic" interpretation of the differences between French rationalism and British empiricism may seem overly simplified, but that is exactly what several scholars maintain, as became apparent in the discussions at the 1960 conference that fostered *African Systems of Thought* and in Richards's review of the book (1967).¹⁹

Whatever the causes, British study of African cultures demonstrates the continued domination of positivist functionalists' assumptions. Concerning anthropologists' ambivalence toward religion, Gell observed that "there has always been something scandalous about magic, fascinating and repellant at the same time" (1974:16; see also Lewis 1974). Some anthropologists' response has been to deny religion a central role in African cultures. Obviously anthropologists should not debunk others' beliefs (as illustrated above), but the alternative is not necessarily "a conversion experience" (Turner 1975:32) or the use of a "mystical idiom" when discussing divination (Evans-Pritchard 1968:320).

What we do need is increased reflexivity by anthropologists and more attention paid the anthropology of knowledge (Jackson 1978; Crick 1982). For example, a comparison of Christian and Jewish scholars of African religions might be very informative (Evans-Pritchard 1960:16). Westerlund (1985) demonstrates the value of comparing theological studies by Anglophone (usually Protestant) East and West African scholars and those by Francophone (usually Catholic) Central African scholars. Surely Richards's attempt (1967) to answer why the French find symbol systems and cosmologies in Africa while the British only encounter social systems and subsistence patterns must be pursued further.²⁰ Perhaps Douglas is correct in depicting British anthropologists as diviners delving behind formal appearances to find the reality of unrecognized contradictions of ideal social interaction (1979: 138–39). She develops this comparison in praise of British anthropologists, but Jules-Rosette uses the analogy of social scientists and diviners as they each seek meaningful patterns in apparently random and contradictory elements to critique Western scholarly prejudice when it validates its "oracular reasoning" with a "veil of objectivity" (1978:563–68). Similar observations about the "authorizing process" in truth making by these "specialists" are raised in this volume by Shaw and Fernandez. Others have also compared anthropologists and diviners; Turner humbly observes that his work on the Ndembu "may perhaps be said to reveal an anthropological diviner in action, at the beginning of a long seance that has by no means been concluded" (1975:30).²¹

Typologies of Scholarship and Divination Forms

A review of contemporary scholarship and typologies of divination forms reveals further conceptual problems in the anthropological study of African divination systems. In his excellent critical survey, Devisch (1985) categorizes the major approaches to the study of divination in Africa under the headings "(structural)-functionalist," "external, cognitive," and "internal, semiotic and semantic" and distinguishes each anthropologist's varying use of different models. In the first grouping Devisch (54–62) separates psychological analyses which emphasize therapeutic functions of divination (e.g., reduction of anxiety) and sociological analyses which stress sociopolitical functions (e.g., reestablishing social order). He also notes those studies which seek divination's function in correspondences of a culture's divination forms and features of social structure or cultural change.²²

Although external cognitive approaches (Devisch's second category, 62–68),²³ consider "the expressive and explanatory function of divination, seen as a conceptual system, a system of thought, a way of knowing" (62), they remain variations of the functionalist orientation in their literal interpretations and assumptions of Western science's universality. They assume order as an individual and group goal and thus "offer the epistemological complement of the structural-functionalist interpretation of divination" (62) by focusing on sociopolitical order, moralizing trends, or a "pre-scientific way of knowing." Because other systems of knowledge are expected to adhere to Western positivist scientific principles, they are, of course, found lacking; therefore, these approaches ultimately portray divination as "illogical" and "non-rational." In this category are those anthropologists whom Gell terms "apologists" (1974:17; see also p'Bitek 1970:40).²⁴

Devisch sees more promise in his third grouping of internal, semiotic, and semantic approaches (68–76),²⁵ which allow divination's methods and symbolic models to stand on their own and not simply be representations of social structures. The appropriate analysis should focus on the esthetic elements, semiotic patterning, dramaturgical features, and transformational processes of the diviner and the divinatory congregation. Devisch's "praxeological approach" (demonstrated, I believe, by most of this volume's essays) also takes into account the specific divination event, differing types of divination, clients' problems, and the subsequent dynamics of the sessions which lead to practical action in the larger cultural context (77). Finally, this helpful review questions divination's transcultural use—how a system rooted in culture-specific symbolism serves clients from different cultures, as is so often the case. I analyze the common use of "foreign" diviners in the final essay in this volume.

Rigid dichotomizations separating states of consciousness and human and spiritual or suprahuman realms have contributed to the inadequacies of typologies of divination systems, although the tremendous variety of divinational forms defies any easy categorization. Divination systems employ virtually anything that can register change with subsequent pattern alternations being interpreted. DeWaal Malejifit (1968:216–24) distinguishes interpretation of signs, divination via human

experiment, and divination in altered states of consciousness. Lessa and Vogt (1979: 333) separate inspirational (possession) and noninspirational divination (interpretation of both fortuitous and deliberate events), and Zuesse (1987:376) cites intuitive, possession, and wisdom divinational forms.²⁶

African-based typologies reflect a similar pattern of ideas. Crawford (1967: 179–81) proposes a tripartite division of forms, allowing that the same diviner may employ all three: psychic (involving possession), psychological (diviner interviewing client), and causal (chance cast of objects). Reflecting the dichotomizations suggested by Lessa and Vogt (1979) and Zuesse (1979:212ff), Zahan (1979: 86) categorizes diviners as "interpreters" (an intellectual process) and "messengers" (a mediumistic process). Devisch (1985:51–54) distinguishes "interpretative," "mediumistic," and "oracular-interpretative" divination. In the first form the diviner manipulates divinatory vehicles and decodes their communication according to an established scheme. For mediumistic divination, with its "transformation in the diviner's consciousness," Devisch accepts Bourguignon's distinction (1968) of trance, possession trance, and shamanistic trance. Between the interpretive and mediumistic forms are a variety of oracular-interpretative forms in which "mediumistic phenomena or oracular mediums" intervene (but not through the diviner), as in ordeals and the movement or configuration of significant objects.²⁷

Other principles are present which might guide our categorizations. Blier (1983) notes that many divinatory processes involve locomotion, by tracing movement (fox's tracks among the Dogon), interpreting resistance (Zande rubbing boards), or even using associated implements (East African sandal divination). Or we could consider the opposition of open-ended analogical systems (such as Ndembu basket divination) and fixed response digital systems (based on a yes/no binary such as the Zande poison oracle).

Such a diversity of organizational schemes would seem to reinforce the stereotype of divination's capriciousness: divination is whatever practitioners call divination. Actually, careful choices are made in each culture among many possible methods, mediums, and materials for divination, and these choices must be studied closely. But with each culture employing several divination forms and diviners often utilizing different types in the same session, previous typologies are unsatisfactory because the cognitive modes they attempt to distinguish usually overlap. In fact, a key to our understanding of divination is found in the continual reference to an intermediate category between the poles of mathematical calculation and spirit mediumship. All analyses try to distinguish those forms involving ecstatic states from those performed in normal states of consciousness, yet the only real difference between them is that in ecstatic states the occult powers "speak" through the diviner rather than the divinatory apparatus. All divination forms involve a non-normal state of inquiry which then requires a "rational" interpretation of the revealed information by the client if not by the diviner. Thus, as Devisch and Shaw assert, in response to Turner, both "analytical" and "revelatory" dimensions are present (see their essays in this volume).

It is far more fruitful to focus on the total process generated rather than try to distinguish the individual mechanical causes of the oracular diagnosis because

they are similar means to the same end. Obviously more attention must be paid to emic typologies. Some resolution of our difficulties may be possible when we have learned more about which form of divination correlates with which kind of problem. For example, is Shaw correct to suggest in her essay that analytic divination forms are used for more formal legalistic problems while revelatory forms are used for more occult-oriented issues?

Although many aspects of divination are treated in this volume, we have by no means exhausted all dimensions of this multifaceted topic. We must immediately acknowledge the scarcity of research by Africans on divination systems. This situation must be rectified, but it is certainly understandable given the negative portrayals of divination by European and American anthropologists and theologians (see p'Bitek 1970 and Westerlund 1985). Abimbola's publications on Yoruba Ifa divination are among the few such studies available. Important new work is being published on African philosophy by Africans, such as Hountondji (1983), and by teams of Africans and non-Africans, such as Ruch and Anyanwu (1984) and Hallen and Sodipo (1986) (which suggests the value of cross-cultural cooperation for such topics); but unfortunately these works do not treat divination.

As any area of study refines its efforts, more questions than answers result. Of the many dynamic elements in divination, the dramaturgical and linguistic are least understood. More biographies of those exceptional individuals who become diviners are needed. More regional studies of divination complexes would clarify the relationships among divination systems. Divination must be studied in the larger context of decision making in daily life. Although Gluckman suggests that divination articulates a people's theory of morality and distinguishes between occult and legal responsibility (1972), its study can no longer be limited to religious contexts. The association of divination with judicial systems is critical, as Huizinga discussed years ago (1950). What are the decision-making mechanisms available to each society and how do they differ in terms of sources and types of knowledge? The correlations of social structure with divination (Park 1967) and spirit mediumship (Greenbaum 1973) can now be better pursued. Are there distinct types and users of divination among cultures with differing subsistence strategies and political systems? Are Edgerton (1974) and Goldschmidt (1986) correct that divination is more prevalent among pastoralists than farmers?

Even more important, we must learn more about different African cultures' systems of knowledge. Are different types of knowledge available from unique sources with distinct methods of acquisition and criteria of validation? How do these concepts correspond to each culture's theories of personality and behavior, religion, and the natural world? Certainly efforts by cross-cultural psychologists must incorporate indigenous epistemologies in order to avoid the dead ends of imposed frames and mechanisms in their study of cognitive processes. ²⁸ A more complete study of divination systems, as provided by the essays included here, demonstrates that we can undertake the documentation of the intellectual histories of African societies. Data are available to trace the development of different ideologies and epistemologies, and we have an obligation to fulfill this challenge.

Many African peoples maintain that "real" knowledge is hidden, secret, available only to certain people capable of using it properly. Frequently that knowledge is only revealed through divination. Thus we return to the basic issue which this volume addresses: how can we possibly gain an understanding of contemporary African peoples and their ongoing search for sufficient knowledge to complete their life patterns unless we try to understand their sources of knowledge, their ways of knowing?

All who have contributed to this volume intend to convince others to reconsider their relegation of divination to a peripheral and exclusively religious role in culture. We especially hope that African scholars will reject the biases which have so misrepresented African epistemologies and will return to their own elders to ensure that African systems of knowledge are part of the total record of the human enterprise. We reaffirm p'Bitek's challenge that "the African scholar must endeavor to present the institutions of African peoples as they really are" (1970:7), and we hope this collection of essays contributes toward that end.

Notes

1. This volume developed from a panel on divination systems at the 1981 African Studies Association meeting, where Alden Almquist, Rudolph Blier, John W. Burton, and Piet Meyer first presented their papers. My sincere thanks to Mark Whitaker for his helpful comments on this introduction.
2. See Evans-Pritchard (1966:155-61) and Ray (1976:2-7). As Evans-Pritchard concludes, "It was in such a climate of Comtism, utilitarianism, Biblical criticism, and the beginnings of comparative religion that social anthropology, as we now know it, came into being" (161).
3. There was, for example, Bouché-Leclercq's monumental *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité*, 4 vols. (1879-82).
4. Douglas (1979) also suggests correspondences between the surrealist poets and the Dogon of Griaule and his collaborators, and Clifford explicitly develops the idea in his discussion of "Ethnographic Surrealism" (1988). Griaule, one recalls, first published on the Dogon in surrealist journals such as *Minotaure* (1933).
5. Elsewhere Evans-Pritchard observes that American anthropologists all regarded religious belief as illusion because "religion is superstition to be explained by anthropologists, not something an anthropologist, or indeed any rational person, could himself believe in" (1966:162).
6. Even today, accounts such as Grindal's (1983) and Stoller and Olkes's (1987) are exceptional, as most anthropologists do not publish their paranormal experiences (see Lewis 1974 and Long 1977: 371-96). They also avoid work on divination by parapsychologists, such as Stanford (1972).
7. For more thorough comments on the personal and professional dimensions of this complex individual, see Beidelman (1974), Lienhardt (1974), Douglas (1981), and Burton (1983).
8. Interestingly, van Binsbergen and Schoffeleers raise the issue of their contributors' religious faith but conclude that the papers reflect no clear influence (1985:36). A survey

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