

# Culture of Hope in West Africa

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In many (Middle Eastern) Islamic societies, the activities of healers and diviners are looked upon with suspicion by the representatives of their respective religious orthodoxies. Sometimes they are even banned by the state. In Senegal and Gambia, however, divinatory and therapeutic ritual unfolds in the centre rather than at the margins of Islamic practice. A number of reasons account for this situation. Historically, in most West African societies Islam first spread through scholars who were schooled in the Islamic esoteric sciences

(*ulum al-asrar*) and who offered their services to the leading members of local non-Islamic aristocracies. Due to this early identification of Islamic ritual specialists with esoteric knowledge and service, practices such as divination and the making of protective amulets have been associated with, and seen as a proof of, the power of Islamic religion. This strong link between West African Islam and the arts of divination and healing is also reflected in the fact that even diviners and healers without specific knowledge of the Islamic literary corpus and Arabic writing are, as long as they are perceived to operate within an Islamic cultural framework, generally referred to with the same titles that are used to refer to persons renowned for their Islamic education and expertise in the Islamic literary tradition.<sup>1</sup> In other words, both in Senegal and Gambia, being a specialist in divination or healing is practically synonymous to being a religiously learned person and vice versa. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that even those divination techniques that are historically not associated with the Islamic esoteric sciences, such as the widespread practice of cowrie-shell divination, refer to the Islamic charitable practice of *sadaqa* as their most important ritual remedy. Although pre-Islamic in origin, cowrie-shell divination thus works through, and within, an explicitly Islamic ritual idiom.

## The personal significance of divinatory consultation

For the majority of people in Senegal it is common to consult divination specialists either on a regular basis or at certain crucial moments in life. This is especially the case when no other remedy can be found as, for instance, in the case of a persistent illness that western style medicine fails to

cure. Other problems that are frequently approached through divinatory consultation include decisions concerning marriage and divorce, issues of health, work opportunities and migration. In general, the concern lies on the question how one's personal situation will develop in the future and what can be done to assure a positive development of one's personal affairs. Herein Senegambian divination differs markedly from central and southern African divinatory traditions that aim primarily at exploring the hidden cause of past events.

Common questions posed are, for instance: Is the person that I have in mind the right marriage partner for me? Will my marriage recover from its present strains? Will my child soon recover from his illness? Will I be able to pass the final exams? Will I find an employment in the near-by future? Will I get the chance to travel to Europe like so many others?

**Divination is one of the most resistant institutions of ritual life in West African countries such as Senegal and Gambia. Rather than being practised at the margins of an Islamic orthodoxy, Senegambian divination is embedded in and integrating other forms of Islamic ritual. By focusing on the existential value of these practices rather than on their outward formal aspects, divination and Islam come into view as sharing in the construction of a cultural space of hope and prospect that allows the subject to deal with his or her most urgent concerns, predicaments, and afflictions.**

Such probably universally common questions have a particular currency in the Senegambian context where the financial and general economic situation of many people is chronically unpredictable, where traditional agricultural modes of subsistence seem to fail to provide sufficient income, where regularly paid jobs are unavailable for most, and where the only hope for the young and yearning seems to lie abroad, in Europe or North America. As divination is able to respond to these individual concerns and predicaments,

the art of divination forms one of the most persevering institutions of traditional ritual practice in Senegal and Gambia. While other forms of ritual expression and action such as initiation rites, spirit possession and healing cults are in many postcolonial contexts under threat due to ideological power struggles and often harsh and socio-culturally uprooting economic conditions, divination thrives.<sup>2</sup> No neighbourhood without one or several diviners specializing in different divinatory techniques that reach from Islamic geomancy (*ramalu* in Mandinka and Wolof) and dream divination (*istikhara*), to cowrie divination and other casting techniques working with objects such as roots, sticks, ground nut shells, coins, etc. Faced with this panoply of different divination techniques, each with its specific logic and technical requirements, the question arises as to what do all these different forms of divination have in common? How far do these different forms constitute culturally coherent divinatory praxis? What is divination and what does it bring about?

## Divination as hope

The development or programme of a divinatory consultation can be shown as consisting of several consecutive steps. The consultation starts with the pronunciation of the "intention" (*nganiyo*) by the client. This "intention," i. e. the reason or motivation for the consultation, has to be pronounced in silence, unheard by the diviner who is supposed not to have prior knowledge of the exact reason of his client's visit. Thereupon, it is the task of the diviner to locate the client's "intention" through his divinatory abilities. For the client, with the silent articulation of his most intimate and urgent personal concern, the divinatory encounter opens up a cultural space that allows the subject to realize and confront the issues which are at the core of his concern or affliction. The divinatory performance is referred to as an act of "looking at" or "viewing" (*jubeero* in Mandinka, *seet* in Wolof). An act that must not primarily be understood as direct visual perception but as a complex process of interpretation and intuition based upon the individual diviner's technical ability, experience, and general insight into the client's moral and material life conditions. As the diviner succeeds to address the issues and questions that are most significant for his client, different paths of thought and reflection appear and start to complete and reshape the subject's understanding of his or her own personal situation. By naming and referring to different aspects of reality such as the body, the house, the family, dreams, spirits, the heart, or the mind of the person, out of and through the concrete articulations of the divinatory enunciation, the personal and cultural life-world originates anew.

In the attempt to gain insight and to spell out the possible developments of the client's future, divination is in itself "chrono-poetic," time-making, i.e. shaping and re-shaping the subject's consciousness of the future with every consultation. The significance and potential power of this time-making quality of Senegambian divination comes into view if one considers the situation of desperation and depression that

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PHOTO BY KNUT GRAW, 2003

**Samba Nguer,  
a cowrie-diviner  
demonstrating  
his art,  
Serekunda,  
Gambia, June  
2003.**

the closed temporality of doubt, uncertainty, and affliction with a new divinatory temporality of prospect and hope. In my opinion, this perspective on (Islamic) divinatory praxis highlights the existential value of divination. Moreover, this understanding of divinatory praxis, due to Senegambian divination's embeddedness in Islamic ritual, also bears the potential for a more encompassing understanding of the existential significance of other aspects of Islam in Senegal, Gambia and, possibly, elsewhere.

In this context, it is important to note that the charitable practice of *sadaqa* is not the only explicitly Islamic dimension of divinatory ritual. Another practice that is linked to divinatory praxis is, for instance, that of supplicatory prayer (*du'a*). This prayer is performed by the client before the actual distribution of the objects, as well as, at least ideally, by those receiving them. While being an integral part of divinatory ritual, the practice of *du'a* also plays a highly significant role in religious festivities and ceremonies, when parting on a journey, as response to a gift, or for the general importance that is attributed to the (non-divinatory) consultation of marabouts. While divination can and should be perceived as a distinct cultural practice of great cultural elaboration, one should not overlook its intrinsic relation to other (Islamic) practices. A relation that is not only practical or instrumental. Through practices such as *sadaqa* and *du'a*, but also through much more spectacular events of religious life such as the famous *magal* of Touba, the annual pilgrimage to the capital of the Senegalese Mouride-brotherhood, Senegambian Islam contributes to the same cultural space of hope and prospect that is aimed at, and generated in, the divinatory encounter.

The proposed anthropological and phenomenological perspective on divinatory praxis thus opens up the possibility to recognize the existential dimension of religious life and signifying praxis. A dimension that is often eclipsed by studies of religion and rituals which focus primarily on the historical, theological, symbolical or political content of what, for the cultural subjects

overcomes someone in a situation where the promise of a future has seemingly ceased to exist. As an answer to such situations, divination comes into view as a cultural technology of hope and prospect, offering perspectives that can be further pursued. The divinatory encounter produces prospects for the future and enables the subject to develop new hope, and thereby lies its power. In this sense, divination brings about a situation that is qualitatively different from the pre-consultation condition.

The consultation ends with the prescription of formalized ritual action in the form of the distribution of *sadaqa* (*sadaa* in Mandinka, *sarax* in Wolof), i.e. the charitable distribution of objects that range from sugar cubes or candles to cloth and food to be given to others so that the predictions can realize themselves and the predicted developments can be positively influenced. As such, divination does not exhaust itself in a discursive field of predictions but rather obliges the consulter to act. By allowing and forcing the cultural subject to actively pursue his or her own personal "intention," divination opens up a cultural space that responds to the subject's most existential concerns. It empowers the subject where for many the contemporary postcolonial life-world seems to have nothing on offer but false promises, marginalization, and exclusion.

### The existential value of divination and Islamic ritual

Our anthropological understanding of divination as a cultural field of hope and prospect shows that divination is not just an abstract search for knowledge but forms a much more encompassing and fundamental cultural praxis of understanding and empowerment. A cultural praxis that, in shaping the subject's relation to his or her own personal future, replaces

themselves, is, first of all, a fundamental attempt of meaningful being-in-the-world. A cultural way of being also, that allows the subject (and society as a whole) to deal actively with the predicaments of a postcolonial globalizing world, providing elements of empowerment in the struggle for a better life.

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### Notes

1. Titles of respect that are used are, for instance, *mooro* in Mandinka, *serigne* in Wolof, and *thierno* in Pulaar. The Arabic derived term "marabout" that is often used by francophone Senegalese, as well as by western scholars, can equally refer to religious specialists in the strict sense as well as to divination and healing specialists.
2. For a study of the culture of spirit possession threatened by Islamic religious hegemony cf. for instance A. Masquelier, *Prayer has Spoiled Everything: Possession, Power, and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001). For the transformations of traditional ritual institutions in popular culture and religious life in a non-Islamic environment cf. F. De Boeck and M. F. Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Ghent: Ludion, 2004).