



## Divination

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*Divination is a widespread cultural practice that takes varied forms worldwide. It can be diagnostic, forecasting, and interventionist, in the sense of changing the receptor's destiny. The classic distinction is that of Cicero's inspirational divination versus that which requires some form of trained skill. Oracles, seers, and prophets in Ancient Greece would be part of the first category, while African basket diviners, Yoruba priests of divination, and Mongolian shamans would be part of the latter category. Arguably most forms of divination require both inspiration and skill. Divination practices are often based in nature, taking form through its elements. It can be done with things, such as tea leaves, bones, nuts, and water, as well as cards, and other non-nature-based components. It can also be done in and as the body, such as with spirit possession, mediation, and dreams. Furthermore, there are spontaneous forms of divination, such as reading the movement of birds, and more formal ones requiring meticulous human input. But links to the divine can vary, with Western forms of divination often devoid of a tradition or theology behind the use of oracles. As a concept, divination has constituted one of anthropology's primary tropes for representing its exotic 'other'. While cognitive and symbolic-intellectualist approaches understand divination as a mostly explanatory device, critics signal to divination's embodied, worldmaking, and also ontological character.*

### Introduction

A good first way of approaching divination is to consider it as a means of arriving at answers to a personal or social quandary. As such, divination may be diagnostic, in that it offers advice, guidance, rules, and taboos to be followed. It can also be forecasting, by predicting future events, and it may even be interventionist, by intervening in the receptor's spiritual and physical health or indeed in their destiny.

That said, divination is also a ritual and a tradition, 'constituted by, and constituting, an ongoing dialogue with more-than-human agents' (Curry 2010: 114-115). Nature is traditionally fundamental to divination, whose indigenous metaphorical roots remit to natural phenomena such as stones, [water](#), and [animal](#) behaviour (Curry 2010: 115). In some African and Afro-American religious communities, animal blood and other sacrifices are necessary to obtain enough vitality for the gods to manifest in an oracle, as a prelude to interpretation (exegesis) on the part of the diviner. Different concepts of temporality seem to apply in divination. To engage in 'evil eye' exorcisms and coffee-cup readings, or tasseography, in Greece, for instance, one has to be able to comprehend multiple temporalities. C. Nadia Seremetakis explains, '[l]inear, compartmentalized time advanced by modernity precludes any interpenetration of the present and the future' (2009: 339), characteristic of divination. For instance, modernity's temporality has little to say about [dream](#) signs from the future and how these penetrate the present, for dreamers. In modern times, the present is something impermeable (Seremetakis 2009), unaffected by the future-telling of oracles such

as coffee-cup readings, which interpret the patterns on remaining coffee sediments.

Divination has been documented [ethnographically](#) as a phenomenon with an astounding variety of methods and techniques across cultures. In *De Divinatione* (2007), written in 44 BC, the Roman philosopher Cicero distinguishes between inspirational kinds of divination, such as visions or dreams, and those requiring some form of trained skill, such as astrology. Oracles, seers, or prophets in Ancient Greece would be considered part of the first lot. Indeed, healing sanctuaries in the ancient Greek world promoted forms of dream incubation for the premonition and recognition of ailments (Tedlock 2010). Techniques for skill-based divination tend to involve interpreting diviners, who can be socially recognised and highly respected as experts, or indeed shamans,<sup>[1]</sup> in their respective societies.

Divination can be done with *things*, such as consecrated or significant objects, bones, shells, stones, tea leaves, or cards. But it can also be carried out via *bodies*, cultivated through spirit mediumship and shamanism, in which there is a communicative prerogative to the possessed: messages come from the mouths of mediums but do not originate with them. A medium's sensory and subjective information can remain relevant, such as with North American 'channelers' (Brown 1999) or with Latvian 'sensitives'<sup>[2]</sup> (Skultans 2007). Alternatively, full possession can annihilate the medium's consciousness altogether and they become pure vehicles for the divine (Wafer 1991). In some cases, trance by a witchcraft spirit can constitute evidence of foul play by others, whereby it qualifies as divination of sorts (see Fontein 2014, for a discussion of this in UK courts).

Links to the divine in divination vary. It can be buttressed by a cosmology of invisible entities, which an oracle mediates, such as with the orisha gods in the Yoruba cowry-shell divination (Bascom 1969). Yet it may also be experienced as a direct configuration of the cosmos as it is, such as with the Tarot, astrology, or numerology, which animate the cosmos with extra-human causal forces, but do not necessarily rely on the existence of a single god or deity. This second category includes conceptualizations by Jungian scholars such as Marie-Louise von Franz, for whom the unconscious is a repository of collective archetypal knowledge, that is catalysed perfectly through divination (1980).

Importantly, divination does not just belong to 'traditional' societies. In Western societies for example, experts often use divination without a cultural sanction of any kind, and indeed [magical](#) traditions are often associated with the upper classes (Greenwood 2009). Electronic and [digital](#) technology can also become important, such as when paranormal investigators contact the [dead](#) using white-noise generating machines known as Ghost or Divination Boxes, resulting in so-called Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP) (Noory & Guiley 2011). Further, divination has something to say about representational concepts of mediation and transcendence in modern technology. Aisha Beliso-De Jesús has used the ethnography of transnational divinatory practices between Cuba and the United States (2015) to argue that electronic media, such as the

Internet, or DVDs, enable the expansion not just of Afro-Cuban religion, but also of the movement and transit of its deities through electric currents. Modern media and spirit here cannot easily be analytically separated.

Some scholars have proposed divination is part of ‘magical thinking’, which we are all capable of, either because it is biologically, evolutionarily innate (Barrett 2004; Boyer 1994; Nemeroff & Rozin 2000), or because we are all in possession of an ultimately ‘irrational’ intuition. Thorley *et al.* (2010) have even proposed the term ‘essential divination’ to describe the quotidian symbolic thinking, some of which is unconscious, which characterises all human beings. In any case, divination is not an arbitrary cultural practice; it is, in the words of Philip M. Peek, ‘often the primary institutional means of articulating the epistemology of a people’ (1991: 2): both a way of knowing, and a trusted means of decision-making. It is also a source of social and political power.

But as a concept, it has also constituted one of anthropology’s primary tropes for representing its exotic ‘other’. In this entry, I follow the main functionalist and intellectualist-symbolic perspectives that have dominated the anthropology of divination. In broad strokes, structural-functionalism sees cultural elements as fitting together organically and maintaining social cohesion, whereas intellectualist-symbolic approaches see divination as commenting on or explaining the social and natural world. These perspectives are underwritten by the notion that practitioners *represent* reality in myriad and expert ways with available but limited knowledge, and that divination implies a complex knowledge of social relationships in a given society articulated in symbolic ways. At the end of this entry, I will explore recent approaches to divination that understand it thoroughly in its worldmaking and [ontological](#) capacities.

### **Randomness, interpretation, and language**

One of the guiding questions of the anthropology of religion has been, in the words of Dan Sperber, why some people entertain and [reproduce](#) ‘apparently irrational beliefs’ (1985). This puzzlement has haunted much of the anthropology of divination.<sup>[a]</sup> For Sperber, this assumed ‘irrationality’ can be explained if we take into consideration that evolved [minds](#) are capable of having *meta-representations*, i.e. representations of representations. The paradigmatic example of these are spirits and other beings that perform extraordinary feats with disregard for the laws of physics and biology. Thus, it is because a person can have *reflective* beliefs (2001) based on a meta-presentational capacity inherent to the human brain that we can believe in, say, dragons (an example in Sperber’s 1982 text), or guiding spirits in the absence of ever having seen them.

Another way in which the anthropology of divination has partially redeemed its denizens of the charge of ‘irrationality’ (see Argyrou 2002) is by working from what is taken as the basic condition of divination – randomness. The assumption of some anthropologists is that oracular systems don’t *really* work, and that

what matters about them is interpretation, not divine or mystical intervention of any kind. Randomness, and chaos, have thus been largely understood as a necessity of divination; namely, as a prelude to an expert's exegesis in the language of cultural symbols. The key is that randomness provides a blank canvas of sorts for the oracular enterprise, something to be worked over cognitively and socially, which may sometimes be necessary for the survival of a community. In his study of scapulmancy, or shoulder-blade divination,<sup>41</sup> among the Naskapi Indians of the Labradorian peninsula in Canada, Omar Khayyam Moore argued that divination is instrumental in the [tribe's](#) life-supporting [hunting](#) endeavours because it randomises human behaviour in a context where avoiding fixed hunting patterns can be an advantage (1957: 73). Habitual success in certain hunting areas can lead to the depletion of game; randomness, presupposed for divination, is here constitutive of Naskapi livelihood itself.

Indeed, randomness is so taken for granted by some divination scholars that it is widely assumed that the difference between a 'good' and 'bad' divination is the diviner's capacity to theoretically leap between complete arbitrariness and representational form. This is done through competences and knowledge of social and personal circumstances. Tedlock, for instance, observes that diviners are

[s]pecialists who use the idea of moving from a boundless to a bounded realm of existence in their practice. Compared with their peers, diviners excel in insight, imagination, fluency in language, and knowledge of cultural traditions (2001: 191).

Moving from an unbounded to bounded plane is thus informed by theory, cosmology, and knowledge of one's social cohort and its myriad [relations](#). The anthropology of African divinatory systems has been particularly elucidative of this. The utterances of African diviners often imply linguistic and poetic dexterity, as well as the ability to artfully select or omit certain passages or oracular observations, banish socially problematic implications, as well as infer collectively what the best possible result might be.

The prime example of these social and rhetorical strategies is Richard Werbner's work on the Kalanga of Botswana (1973; 2017), where he posits a 'superabundance of understanding' on the part of diviners, which must be whittled down and tuned to suit a particular situation or client. As in many African societies, Kalanga diviners are persuasive, and have 'highly stylized language' - both immediate events and matters of personal history must be part of their divinatory speech (1973: 1414). 'Transparent talk without counterpoint of hidden and manifest meanings is inadequate for divination' for the Kalanga, Werbner argues (1415). Divination consists of throwing four separate pieces of ivory, each of which has two surfaces, one marked, the other unmarked. The pieces have characteristics of age and sex at first glance. The 'senior' of these pieces is Old Male, while the others include Young Male, Old Female, Young Female (Werbner 1973: 1416-17). Sixteen possible configurations can result from a throw, taking into account that all four pieces are thrown at once, and that some may land with no markings. Most people are familiar with the overt meaning of these configurations. However, Werbner's argument is that there is a matrix of

metaphors to the configurations known expertly only by the diviner:

[a] diviner strings together riddles, paradoxes, and equivocal figures of speech, with barbed emphasis in rhetorical questions, each associated with a cast of the diviner's four two-faced lots (1421).

He speaks in praises, imagery and evocations, some cryptic. The point is not just one of aesthetics, he says. It is, in essence, the

'sociologically significant aspects of the ordered relations' – based on, say prior knowledge of personal circumstances – 'which free divination [...] from the risk of being such a gamble. There is a cognitive control such that contextually relevant meanings within a matrix shape divination, rather than randomness' (Werbner 1973: 1419).

David Zeitlyn also stresses the interpretive and collaborative dialogues needed to achieve successful divinatory outcomes (2001). The series of operations that manipulating an oracle implies may themselves be random, but the interaction between clients and diviner is indispensable to the processes of interpretation itself, especially when texts are particularly opaque, such as the *I Ching*,<sup>[5]</sup> and the diviner must take on the qualities of a 'literary critic' (2001: 228). Elsewhere, Zeitlyn writes on spider divination among the Mambila in Cameroon (1993), whose results are presented as evidence in court among, say, chiefs of lineages. Again, oracular meanings are not simple. They involve a host of factors, including a complex negotiation of political, familiar, and personal concerns.

### **Symbolic and intellectualist approaches**

Symbols are of primary importance in Victor Turner's analysis of divination. We will focus on his [ethnography](#) *Revelation and divination in Ndembu ritual* (1975) and on Ndembu basket divination, *nǵombu yakusekula* within that. It involves shaking up or tossing a series of objects in a round, flat, open basket, a type of action associated with women's winnowing of millet, and standing for the 'sifting of truth from falsehood' (Turner 1975: 213, 215). The objects – figurines – are selected by the diviner from a large group of objects of assorted shapes, colours, and sizes, kept separately. Each one represents the human being in various postures. Before throwing, the diviner asks a question; after the toss (he does three) he examines which figurines were left above the others. More questions can follow. Turner argues that his skill 'consists in the way in which he adapts his general exegesis of the objects to the given circumstances' (1975: 214).

Turner's ethnography is considered to be exhaustive and theoretically innovative (De Boeck & Devisch 1994). For Turner, divination can be thought of as

a form of social analysis, in the course of which hidden conflicts between persons and factions are

brought to light, so that they may be dealt with by traditional and institutionalized procedures (1975: 235).

It is, under this light, a 'form of social redress', whereby the diviner exonerates or accuses individuals, uncovering 'unconscious impulsions behind antisocial behavior' (Turner 1975: 233).

The diviner is all too aware of the [precarious](#) nature of his own position. Approached by a family for revealing causes of sickness or misfortune in a family member, his [work](#) includes identifying the witch who may be responsible for it. The diviner knows that the witch-culprit may be a family member who stands to gain politically by the [death](#) of the victim. His appraisal of the balance of power between competing factions is therefore critical. Turner argues that divinatory symbols open an understanding of the 'social drama' at hand, and redirect social action appropriately:

[t]he diviner [...] is trying to grasp consciously and bring into the open the secret, and even unconscious, motives and aims of human actors in some situation of social disturbance (1975: 232).

De Boeck and Devish argue that Turner's symbolic analysis fails to account for the multidirectionality and polyvocality of symbolic and metaphorical processes (1991: 103). While he acknowledges the emotive character of divination, the latter is taken unproblematically as part of a 'script' or 'text' that somehow represents or condenses social life. Ultimately, for Turner, divination

is a device to help a conscious individual to arrive at decisions about rightdoing and wrongdoing, to establish innocence or allocate blame in situations of misfortune, and to prescribe well-known remedies' (1975: 233).

The ultimate aim of divination is then to heal social schisms and lead to a consensus. But this view may be too simple: De Boeck and Devish recommend that Turner's emphasis on structure and social engineering be balanced with one that sensitises [agency](#), praxis, performativity (1991: 103). In the Luunda and Yaka basket divinations studied by these authors, meanings are open-ended and social redress is not necessarily their aim: instead, social dramas multiply into more social dramas. Furthermore, 'in the act of performing and doing' divination, the transformation implicit in the oracular process 'is being embodied by the consultants in the ritual praxis' (De Boeck & Devish 1991: 111). De Boeck and Devish stress that the *performance* of the oracle invites the consultants to redefine their [relations](#) (of reciprocity, commensality, solidarity) and their involvement with their 'life-world' (1991: 112). In this sense the diagnosis that is forthcoming by the diviner already carries within itself 'the meaningful (re)generation of a new integrative social and world-order' (De Boeck & Devish 1991: 112).

Sonia Silva, on the other hand, calls the knowledge produced as part of basket divination in Zambia 'integrative', in the sense that knowledge is lived as pain in the body, as the configurations of material

objects in the basket, and as their interpretation (2014). According to Silva, human bodies, materials and spirits work in tandem (that is, integratively) in the divination process. She says that ‘truthful knowledge in basket divination is not delivered as a set of abstract propositions flushed out of the diviner’s mind’; rather, it is imputed to an ancestral spirit:

[t]his spirit, however, manifests itself through a human body that feels pain and operates the oracle by shaking it. The contrast between the statements of researchers on the topic of basket divination and the statements of basket diviners in northwest Zambia is revealing of a broader, telling story that has defined the scholarship on divination systems in particular, and the study of knowledge in general (2014: 1176).

Silva points to the fact that many of the foundational divination scholars saw diviners as ‘scientists’, whose ultimate aim was to *explain*, albeit *bad* scientists at that. Indeed, like some of his predecessors, Turner too says that the diviner ‘does not try to “go behind” his beliefs in supernatural beings and forces’ (1975: 231). He holds that the premises by which the Ndembu diviner deduces his conclusions are non-rational.

While Turner turns to symbols to explain divinatory practice, E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s 1937 explanation of the *benge* poison oracle among the Azande in Sudan is decidedly intellectualist in scope. Here, poison is given to domestic fowl with the result of its life or death impinging upon the question asked. The poison is a liquid mixture from a forest creeper and is inserted in the fowl’s beak. Sometimes the doses prove immediately fatal; often the fowl recovers; other times it remains unaffected. Reasons why people consult this oracle can vary. Mostly, they aim to discover the agent of some misfortune (namely, a witch). In order to answer a question, there are usually two tests involving two fowl, each of which will be administered the poison in sequence. A verdict (say, if X has committed adultery) must be confirmed through the second test. If the results are contradictory, the verdict is considered invalid (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]: 139). The poison oracle is by far the most important one among the Azande: it has a force of law. For instance, a man wishing to avenge a homicide cannot act without authorization from the poison oracle (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]: 121).

‘Witches’, Evans-Pritchard says famously, ‘as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist. None the less, the concept of witchcraft provides them with a natural philosophy by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained, and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events’ (1976 [1936]: 18). Evans-Pritchard was well aware that the Azande had other concepts of causation that were not mystical. The classic example is that of a granary collapse at a time when people were sitting under it (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1936]: 23). The Azande know that termites undermined the support of the granary ceiling. What is missing is an ‘explanation of why the two chains of causation intersected at a certain time and in a certain place, for there is no interdependence between them’, Evans-Pritchard says (1976 [1937]: 23). The missing link is provided by Azande philosophy of witchcraft. Both natural and mystical causation



co-exist, supplementing each other:

[h]ence we see that witchcraft has its own logic, its own rules of thought, and that these do not exclude natural causation. Belief in witchcraft is quite consistent with human responsibility and a rational appreciation of nature (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1936]: 30).

According to Evans-Prichard, the Azande as studied during the period of 1926-30, when he did his fieldwork, did not rely on belief, but on action, conceptually informed as it was. Thus, when the poison oracle did not work, or contradicted itself, the Zande came up with all kinds of 'secondary elaborations' to support the thesis that it failed for some reason, whether because of a breach of taboo, anger of ghosts, or wrong variety of poison administered (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]: 155). In sum, while the Zande were described as fully rational people, Evans-Prichard held that they 'cannot go beyond the limits set by their culture and invent notions' (1976 [1937]: 163). Their 'web of belief' was not an external structure in which the Zande were enclosed. It was the texture of their thought and they could think that it was wrong (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]: 194; Horton 1967: 155).

Robin Horton has advanced this intellectualist approach (1967a, 1967b). He proposes dealing with the 'puzzling features of traditional religious thinking' through an analogy between theoretical Western [science](#) and religious African thought. Horton uses Evans-Pritchard's ethnography of the Azande extensively, as well as his own work among the Kalabari in contemporary Nigeria, to argue that 'traditional thought' cannot operate outside itself. According to Horton, while there is valid theoretical thought in 'traditional cultures', it is ultimately 'closed' because it is based on [magic](#), witches, oracles, and other mystical phenomena inconsistent with 'reality'. Propositions here are not open to disconfirmation and there is a reluctance to take failure of, say, an oracle as evidence against the existence of spirits or deities. Herein lies, according to Horton, the difference with Western scientists, who operate an 'open' thought system, marked by an experimental method that tests hypotheses and advances theoretical claims. The point for Horton is that both African traditional thought and Western science are theoretical and explanatory, in the sense that they explicate particular circumstances through a particular causal context. Horton's comparison has come under critique for implying in myriad ways that African thought is inferior to Western science (Tambiah 1990: 91). Stanley Tambiah also questions whether the African 'theorizing' observed by Horton would not be in actual fact the pursuance of other [values](#) and interests (1990: 91). In the next section, I explore a body of literature that has taken this [postcolonial](#) critique to heart and tries to break with functionalist, symbolic, and intellectualist approaches to divination.

### **Counterpoint: ontological approaches to divinatory truths**

In an article from 2012 on religious conversion among followers of a Japanese new religion, Philip Swift makes an argument that is indicative of a new direction in the study of religion. He says that conversion is



not conceived of as a 'reordering of one's world-picture, in which novel representations (or beliefs or propositions) are imported into the mind' (Swift 2012: 272-3). Rather, it is essentially a bodily process. Thus the need to shift gears, drop the epistemological focus and foreground difference right from the start, by adopting an [ontological](#) analysis. Swift says this is a well-trodden path in anthropology; indeed, he cites Victor Turner who argued that rites of passage involve 'not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being' (Turner 1967: 102; Swift 2012: 273). In other words, Turner made a case that rites *actuate*, not represent, changed states in people. This praxiological understanding of rituals on the part of Turner contrasts significantly with that of divination, which we have seen above.

A paradigmatic case for the ontological approach to divinatory practice is Martin Holbraad's work on Afro-Cuban Ifá divination. Ifá is an all-male-dominated religious cult in Cuba, in which the diviner, the *babalawo*, chosen for his role by the gods, undergoes years of rigorous training and extensive study of oracular divinations signs (*oddu*), of which there are 256. Babalawos divine with a consecrated board, a white-powder called *aché*, and sixteen palm nuts. Orula, the god of the Ifá oracle, is called, and as different throws are effected, the number of palm nuts remaining in both hands dictates the marks the diviner will draw on the powdered board.

Both Ifá and Santería (Ifá's more popular religious sibling in the Afro-Cuban field) present a relatively fixed cosmology, and a corresponding world of causality (Holbraad 2010: 76). The latter is articulated extensively in myths (*patakies*), as well as in divination, through oracular signs with which they associate. Everything that has existed, presently exists, and will exist is regarded as encompassed under the auspices of the *oricha*-gods and their respective domains and life stories. While the notion that human beings can disrupt a divine social and cosmic equilibrium is rife, and explains misfortune and illness, this is underpinned by an even stronger concept of predestination. Most importantly here is that Orula, the god who has witnessed the destiny of every man and woman, never lies (Holbraad 2007, 2012a, 2012b). Thus, according to Holbraad, oracular pronouncements should not be subject to the truth verification of anthropologists. Holbraad's interpretation is therefore pitted exactly against the intellectualist (and also cognitivist) analyses described above.

Holbraad proposes a new answer to an intractable problem anthropologists have faced with divination (and religion more broadly): the problem that, when in the face of alterity, they often decide to negate the assumptions of the people they study. According to him, 'the job of anthropological analysis [...] is not to account for why [ethnographic](#) data are as they are, but rather to understand *what* they are' (Holbraad 2009: 96). The idea is to review and revise anthropological assumptions analytically, so that they *become* congruent with the said data. Radical alterity demands a fresh conceptual field. Holbraad explains, '[r]ather than enunciating the conditions of native error (be they epistemic, cognitive, sociological, political, or whatever), the analytical task now becomes one of elucidating new concepts' (Holbraad 2012b: 84). In broad strokes, he argues that the job of anthropologists would not be

to *explain* but to *conceptualise*. He proposes the concept of ‘infinition’ (in other words, ‘inventive definition’) as the answer to this conundrum.<sup>[6]</sup> Just like Cuban diviners *infine* their clients, gauged through the notion that the oracle is infallible and indubitable, anthropologists too must invent new terms and new concepts to deal with alterity, say, of a divination system in which truth is not subject to verification or doubt.

There have been other scholars of Afro-Cuban religion inspired by this line of argument in their respective fields, myself included (see, e.g., Espírito Santo 2013). Taking Holbraad’s notion of motility as central to the oracular enterprise in Cuban creole *espiritismo* – in which deities are not seen as individual entities but as *motions*, such as the markings on the divining board – I have argued that randomness is essential to the divinatory act and its results, and is tied to the movement inherent in the ‘things’ used for such purposes, like [water](#) or flames or cards flicked in quick succession. The oracle itself can be secondary to its movement. Movement is what allows spirits to intervene in their messages – it excites a metaphysical domain of beings, and moves potential cosmology into action, bringing it into the concrete world. Relatedly, chaos may not just be a backdrop for meanings but a substance that brings cosmology into concrete existence (Espírito Santo 2013: 33).

Anastasios Panagiotopoulos has also worked with a perspective on ontology, focusing on both diviners and clients. Articulacy, defined as the capacity of a given entity to ‘speak’ through the oracle, cannot be taken for granted. It requires sacrifice, both literal ([animal](#) blood, for instance) and metaphorical (taboos, restrictions, good conduct). In a recent paper, he argues that sacrifice should not be seen through the opposition of sacred/profane, but – in the context of Afro-Cuban religion – as the fuel with which oracular perspectives, and thus articulacy, are ignited (2018: 483). This fuel yields words, which in turn yields perspectives and paths (*caminos*) for the people who seek diviners. As these paths solidify in a given individual, they create centers of oracular production, which are in turn generative of articulacy itself (Panagiotopoulos 2018: 475).

In another article, Panagiotopoulos speaks of spirit ‘affinity’ as the glue through which these paths are revealed (2017). Affinity here, spirit-person kinship if you will, is materialised through spirit representations (dolls), for example, which acknowledge and reify the [dead’s](#) voices and perspectives. Importantly, this relies on being seen and manipulated by a medium. Panagiotopoulos thus takes inspiration from Viveiros de Castro in that he argues that points of view matter in the creation of personhood (2018: 479). But they are not simply *momentary* points of view. Offerings and sacrifices are catalysts for the solidification of divinatory perspectives (‘paths’) that create the conditions for a certain kind of person to exist and modulate her life.

Another anthropologist with similar references is Katherine Swancutt (2006, 2012). In her monograph *Fortune and the cursed*, she argues that Mongolian Buryat shamans adopt spirit perspectives

in their oracular dealings, but that these are characterised by a combination of intersubjective and perspectival encounters (Swancutt 2012: 156). In some cases, the divinatory implements, such as cards, can be ‘hijacked’ by rival shamans resulting in a revelation of only the rival’s perspectives, imbued as they can be with witchcraft. Shamans can thus inadvertently adopt their nemesis’s [agency](#) and pronouncements (Swancutt 2012). ‘Buryats, then, try to control the divinatory implements so that they only *represent* dangerous people, rather than becoming agents-cum-representations of them’: they try to avoid that divinations take on an intensive dimension and turn into outright cursing wars (Swancutt 2012: 162). Instead, they work towards more desirable outcomes such as those of ‘revising’ the clients’ views of the past (Swancutt 2012: 175). Throughout this case there is a tug of war, on the part of the officiating shaman, between representational and ontological dimensions of the divination. It also alerts us to the notion that in divination ‘things’ are not passive, but can take on life, and uncontrollably, for that matter. As Swancutt puts it, objects can ‘carry their subjects within themselves’ (2012: 161). Her work thus alerts scholars of divination to attend to the multiple potential properties of the ‘things’ used for such purposes. In the final section, I turn towards the ‘body’ as the main instrument of divination – often, in the absence of such objects.

### **Possession, dreams, and divining spirits**

Apart from all its cultural concepts and theorisations, divination is also a decidedly bodily thing. As Patrick Curry says, ‘the diviner’s body and everything he or she ‘physically’ performs and experiences is essential to it’ (2010: 115). This is even more so in the absence of divinatory implements or objects. Then the source of knowledge is the diviner’s own bodily manifestations, born as they are from enskilment, expertise, and experience. The prime example of this is spirit possession or shamanism, where oracular pronouncements by the person are perceived to come from a source outside the possessed’s body.

Eliade explains shamanism well among a Siberian community, noting that

[t]he shaman begins by circling the yurt [tent], beating his drum; then he enters the tent and, going to the fire, invokes the deceased. Suddenly the shaman's voice changes; he begins to speak in a high pitch, in falsetto, for it is really the dead woman who is speaking (1972: 209-10).

The shaman is ‘replaced’, somehow, by the divinatory [voice](#). The idea that the dead ‘speak’ through their medium, and that this communication should be taken seriously, is arguably cross-cultural (Bubandt 2009; Lambek 1981; Placido 2001; Rasmussen 1995; Vitebsky 1993). However, these extraordinary individuals do not always lose their consciousness, as Todd Ochoa shows for Cuban Palo Monte (2007, 2013), a spirit possession practice associated with Bantu-speaking slaves. During such possession, there is sometimes no clear boundary between ‘voices’. Even outside of ritual circumstances, Kalunga, a Ba-Kongo derived term referring to the ‘sea of the dead’, may coexist with the medium’s body in varying intensities (2007: 488).

According to Ochoa, Palo invites us to linger on the power of sensation and its capacity to dissolve the body's boundaries. The sea of the dead is not constant, but something that takes one over in waves of saturation, only to recede again. Most interesting is Ochoa's observation that the dead themselves constitute a play of forces that 'suffuses and makes the person who lives Palo' (2007: 488), as people also come into being by [sharing](#) the moods, pains, and sensations, as well as thoughts, of the dead. In this dynamism, one cannot wholly distinguish object from subject, matter from spirit. Neither can the bodies and biographies of mediums be separated from the oracular act itself.

[Dreams](#) are a field that is understood to be little mediated by the conscious cognition of the diviner him or herself, and thus are seen as spaces where knowledge is freely revealed, including about oneself (Hollan 2004). They are also open to anyone, including entire communities. In an article called 'Dreams of treasure', Charles Stewart argues that 'dreams may be treated as exemplary moments of vision in which imaginative temporal flights fuse and create a present imbued with meaning' (2003: 483). Stewart describes how in Naxos, Greece, people have been dreaming with the Virgin Mary who tells them about the location of lost religious idols buried in the hillside for more than a century (2003: 490-3). Dreaming revelations are not considered extraordinary in many parts of the world. Indeed, Rane Willerslev describes how, for Siberian Yukaghir elk [hunters](#), 'the world of dreams and that of waking life are two sides of the same reality, which together constitute *one world*' (2004: 410). Hunters penetrate the 'shadow world' to lure prey into theirs. Thus, the dream has ontological as well as premonitory effects. In African inspired cosmologies in the Caribbean, dreams may be considered places of encounter ipso facto. Karen McCarthy Brown reports on the dream of a [Haitian vodou](#) priestess in New York - Mama Lola - in which a guiding spirit of the pantheon (Papa Gede) appears to answer a specific question (1993); and Diana Maitland Dean analyses the social impact of dreaming in the wider Afro-Cuban religious community (1993). These two [ethnographies](#) point to critical culturally-sanctioned concepts of the self in the emergence of dream divination.

## Conclusion

Divination, as discussed in this entry, is widespread and varied. It can entail objects, consecrated or not, but it can also be bodily processes, for instance, in [dreaming](#), or in spirit possession. Oracular cosmologies often imply a world of metaphysical processes, causality and beings, and different temporal logics, where the future is at the reach of the present. Divination also implies linguistic and discursive dexterity on the part of diviners. The anthropology of African divination systems has demonstrated that diviners are often individuals who are politically, socially, as well as cosmologically knowledgeable, and can draw on this awareness during séances. While some scholars have understood divination in terms of 'magical thinking', it is not generally associated with [magic](#) per se. It is a craft - a skill - that must alternatively be learned and sanctioned, and/or embodied in some way, such as with sensitives or mediums. The anthropology of

divination has taken a variety of analytical routes, among which is regarding divination as an *explanatory* drive, on the part of certain cultures. With the '[ontological turn](#)', scholars have paid more attention to local, native concepts that promise to challenge and renew conceptions of truth, personhood, and reality as such.

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[1] Diviners are people who practiced divination and have the capacity to interpret the results; they do not necessarily have special powers. Shamans, while they can also practice divination, are considered intermediaries of sorts between worlds, and in most cases can fall into trance states.

[2] Channelers are people who speak for non-physical beings or spirits, whereas 'sensitives', sometimes also called 'intuitives', are those who have increased susceptibilities for stimulation of the sensorial kind, often feeling things in their bodies - pains, emotions, spirits in the environment.

[3] Not all anthropologists regard divination as something irrational. Indeed, David Zeitlyn speaks of 'divinatory logics' with diagnostic and prognostic implications (2012).

[4] Scapulmancy is divination by means of the observation of the cracks in an animal cadaver's shoulder-blade, when heated by fire or another instrument.

[5] *I Ching* is also known as 'Book of changes', and is a classic Chinese divination text dating from around 1000 BC. The *I Ching* uses cleromancy, which relies on the generation of random numbers. Consultants will throw coins or another object, and generate a hexagram with six numbers between 6 and 9, and then look up its meaning in the book.

[6] Holbraad is here inspired by both Roy Wagner's *The invention of culture* (1981), and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's take on Amazonian perspectivism - the idea that the point of view makes the subject (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2012; see also Lima 2005).