
Seme Divination in Burkina Faso. I

The diviner's work on the stone

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Through the late Mr Gwene Traoré, chief of Orodara and diviner, I wish to thank all the inhabitants of the region of Orodara, particularly the diviners and the elders, who helped me understand divination. Mr Yacouba Coulibaly worked as translator for the project at the beginning. Mr Hamadou Coulibaly, who is an initiate and knows divination well, was the research assistant throughout most of the study. This project was made possible thanks to funding by the RADICEL-K programme of the Centre Region, France, and from the PALOC research unit in the Research Institute for Development (IRD, France). This research was carried out under the auspices of the Association to Defend and Promote Seme Culture, whose President is Mr Hamadou Coulibaly.

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Introduction

- 1 The Seme, who number ca. 20,000, live in a territory of about 400 km² in the province of Kéné Dougou (figure 1), but only in six villages do they represent the majority. It appears they arrived in the 17th century and speak a Kru language in a Mande and Gur environment (see Boyd et al, 2014).¹ The vernacular terms transcribed according to the international phonetic alphabet (IPA) and the spelling agreed upon by a team of linguists are presented in a table appended at the end of the text.² They do not appear in the body of the text, except in special cases, and are then transcribed in italics in a simplified form. The Seme admit borrowing many of their habits, with modifications, from the Toussian, who they settled near to when they arrived (see Fournier 2016 for a synthesis).

Figure 1. Location of the Seme Country



Map by Anne Fournier based on data contained in Marc Felix & Charles Meur (2001) and BNDT/IGB 2012

- 2 In traditional societies, divination “is a well-established institution informing and stimulating ritual acts” (de Surgy 2013). The work presented here is part of an ongoing research project in religious anthropology. Several people, mainly elders, were interviewed from 2009 onwards about initiation, representations of the person, the institutions of society, etc. Among them were diviners. When the actual study on divination started in 2011, a substantial amount of ethnographic material had already been collected and the author was already fairly familiar with Seme society.
- 3 As one of the names given to the Seme diviner – *gnmonton* 'the one who sees' – indicates, the diviner would have second sight; in other words, he would perceive what is invisible to others. During the thirty minutes or more of a divination session, the diviner is in direct contact with the invisible. The rite takes place in a fascinating environment of cognitive blur and sensory saturation. The diviner recites or chants rapidly a text that abounds in specialised vocabulary, metaphors and proverbs. He also manipulates various objects (notably a stick and cowrie shells) that produce sounds. “If you want to understand what we do in divination, you have to watch us”, the first diviner I spoke to told me. Alas, in the face of so many stimuli, the human eye seemed a poor tool, even when accompanied by a notebook... A precise plan clearly organises the rite, but how to explain the numerous sequences that follow one another, repeated almost in identical fashion? The camera served as a powerful notebook and investigative tool.³ As several diviners quickly authorised the full video recording of some of their divination sessions, adequate material became available to carry out a systematic analysis. The precise sequence of the diviners' gestures, of the sounds produced by their divination equipment and of their spoken words could then be established.⁴ Successive sequences were identified, and how they each articulated with

the whole. Diviners clarified the meaning of these sequences during repeated interviews. This made it possible to identify the existence of a general pattern of organisation of the divination session.

- 4 This work is presented in two articles. The first presents the organisation of a divination session. It analyses in detail the mechanics of the work carried out by the diviner: divinatory techniques and interactions with the various “fetish” objects in his equipment.⁵ Each manipulation of an object and each discourse is closely connected to concepts and institutions that constitute the foundations of Seme society. This first article closely follows the sequence of the divination session and gives a first-level explanation, so to speak, including only the information necessary to follow what is happening on the divinatory stage. In the oracular work thus dissected, gestures, words and sounds are closely associated and respond closely to each other in such a way that none of these aspects has more weight than another. In an introductory study such as this, however, it is not possible to treat all of them equally thoroughly. Only the general principles governing the diviner's discourse are presented, the detailed study of the oral texts and of the acoustic aspects will have to be the subject of later work.⁶
- 5 As divination is a delicate and easy to disrupt moment, the diviners requested that their auxiliary bush spirits also give their consent before any recordings started. Divinatory sacrificial rites at the relevant bush spirits' altars were therefore performed. ⁷ The diviners gave their consent for the images to be disseminated in academic and scientific circles as a means to present Seme culture. ⁸Before and after the shooting, they presented divination and the main institutions of their society in long and repeated interviews that took place between 2010 and today. An integral copy of the recordings was given to them for their family archives.⁹
- 6 Nine divinations performed by several officiants were filmed at length in order to understand the sessions' formal organisation. The very first recordings were of divinations for the research assistant or the author. These were followed by recordings of divinations for people known to the diviner or to the research assistant. To track the sequence of all the diviners' gestures, the first images were recorded in wide shot with a fixed camera. As the pattern of the sessions became clearer and it became possible to anticipate, close-ups were also taken to better read the diviner's gestures. As the diviner became more familiar with the camera and, having seen the footage, more committed to the project of archiving his own work,¹⁰ shots could be taken over the diviner's shoulder or vertically, above the stone.¹¹
- 7 Video excerpts of the divination sessions are presented throughout the first paper in a series of montages of short sequences that underline the unity but also the variations of the diviners' method. Each montage illustrates one ritual sequences as executed by different diviners. Anticipating the broader perspective given in the second article, videos 7 and 8 show an animated sequence of the journeys described by the diviners, and a demonstration of the greeting gestures he says he is making. As requested by the diviners, the videos do not reveal any personal information (nature of the problem treated, identified cause and solution prescribed by the diviner). In this study, it is the diviner who takes centre stage, rather than the client or the relationship between them. Even though the client's problems are the subject of the session, and the client holds the divination stick along with the diviner, the former plays only a very minor role¹² after he has whispered his problem onto an object to be placed on the divination stage.¹³ The diviner can even do without his presence. It is through the diviner's actions

and words that the divination takes shape and it is in these gestures and spoken words that we must seek the keys to what is happening. As the main human actor in divination, the diviner is also a theorist whose comments are precious.

- 8 The second article offers a broader perspective as it invites us to discover the other side of divination by revealing the links of the divinatory rite with the land and with the fundamental representations and institutions of Seme society: conceptions of the person, *dwo* initiation, marriage, territory... In order to reveal the structure of the invisible world with which the diviners interact, this second text also draws on interviews that are not strictly dedicated to divination and on published studies.¹⁴ As a great deal of work has already been carried out on the beautiful cultural constructs of divination and the invisible world in the cultural area to which the Seme belong¹⁵, this second article also places the representations specific to the Seme within this regional context.
- 9 An illness, a misfortune, a dream, a worry, a doubt or sometimes just wanting to make sure that “everything is in order” frequently leads members of Seme society in Burkina Faso to seek a diviner. A diviner must be consulted at the birth of a child to identify the places or offer sacrifices to protect it, at the death of a person to know the “cause” of his death, etc. Almost all rites require a preparatory divination and every social or family event involves one or more divinations. The diviner manages to establish a diagnosis and proposes a prescription to the person consulting. Even if divination can seem mysterious to lay persons, diviners declare “there is nothing secret in it”. According to them, everything that is done and said on a divination scene articulates with precision to acts that occur concurrently in the invisible world. The practice is based on a set of extremely elaborate representations of life, destiny, death, etc. Without having an understanding as clear and as extensive as that of the diviners, those consulting them share the basic representations on which divination is based and can therefore broadly follow what happens during a session.
- 10 The first part of this paper describes the divining process and how the divination session is structured. The second part explains how, at the beginning of the session, the diviner sets the divinatory scene. By speaking and by manipulating the objects that make up the divination material, he reactivates certain connections with the invisible. The third part presents the particularly careful preparation of the divination cowries before consulting them. This last section covers how the questioning is conducted, which leads to identifying the client’s problem and to establishing the prescription needed to solve it.

Making the Oracle Speak on the Stone

A Distinctive Procedure and Materials

- 11 To evoke their divination, the Seme generally speak of the flat black stone on which the stick is rubbed and against which the cowries are thrown. Throughout the divination session, this lithophone is tapped by the diviner with different objects, most notably a short, forked stick and an ox horn that contains six cowries and a copper ring. Two metallic bells also help produce the particular acoustic environment of the Seme divination session. The first is a small finger bell that the diviner only uses with his left hand and which is identical to the one that women use to accompany their singing

during wedding celebrations (Belliard 2014: 84 and 89). A second bell, with an internal clapper, appears to exist in this small format only for divination.¹⁶ It is reminiscent of the *dwo*, main cult of the society; every individual, male or female, begins his or her initiation during adolescence and continues it throughout life.¹⁷ Divination material also includes several small “fetishes”, objects made of plants (figure 2) which have already been described in a previous publication (Fournier 2018).

Figure 2. The diviner's equipment



Divination equipment taken out of its stowing and carrier bag (in the background)

Legend: the stone (1) and its stand (2); the horn (which contains the cowries and is covered by a fabric stopper) (3); a clapping bell (4) and a finger-bell (5); divination stick (6) (to the right, under the finger-bell), here placed on the stone, to the right of the rest of the equipment and almost completely hidden, one of its branches (to the left, pointing towards the carrier bag) has two embossed lines that allow the diviner to identify it; various small plant fetishes placed in the largest of them, a savannah tree pod (7).

Photo by Anne Fournier, Orodara region, 23 November 2014.

- 12 Seme divination is characterised by alternating two divining procedures that are extremely common in West Africa: divination “through the stick” and divination by “throwing the cowries”. After taking a considerable time to set up and prepare his equipment, the diviner starts questioning his personal bush spirit (always female), who is also his divination assistant,¹⁸ with the help of the stick. He puts forward several proposals in the form of successive alternative propositions, e.g. “the problem is inside the house/the problem is not inside the house” until one of them is “accepted” by the oracle. To confirm or refute the answer given, he then performs a series of cowry throws on the stone. Afterwards, he takes up the stick again to propose two new alternative proposals and throws again the cowries. Through these procedures little by little he begins to understand the problem for which the session has been commissioned.
- 13 Alternating several procedures during a single divination session is rather common in Voltaic societies (Moba Gurma in Togo, de Surgy 1986: 121; Tallensi in Ghana, Fortes

1987: 17-18; Lobi in Burkina Faso, Meyer 1991; Anufom in Northern-Togo, Baerends 2013: 165; Bwaba in Burkina, the author's observations). What is unique to Seme divination is the technique of rubbing a stick on a stone. Divining by friction is common in Central Africa (Almquist 1991: 104; Devisch 1991: 113), but the equipment in that area is entirely made of wood and does not usually involve a stick (Retel-Laurentin 1974). Stones are usually used for divination in Western Africa (Blier 1991: 89), but they appear to be hit rather than rubbed (Maurice, 1986: 445, Liberski-Bagnoud 2010: 119, Sewane 2013).¹⁹ Divination "by means of a black stone" which is the subject of this paper appears as something particular to the Seme and their neighbours, the Toussian (Guilhem and Hébert 1964, 1965), from whom they borrowed it.²⁰ In Seme villages other divination practices are certainly used (Cooksey 2004, chapter 3), but they have been borrowed from other societies and the Seme qualify these as foreign, especially those used by female diviners. Divination through a black stone is indeed an exclusively male practice and the only one recognized as truly Seme.²¹

Different Locations for Divination

- 14 Depending on the case, the session can be private or public. When private, it often takes place in the diviner's divination house built for this purpose or in the open, in the diviner's own compound.²² Private sessions can also often take place in the client's house, inside a room or in a corner of the compound of the enlarged family's collective housing. Nevertheless, if the client or the diviner need some privacy, a more remote place can be found. The sessions presented here were all held in these different types of locations. When preparing for the rites of *dwo*, black stone divination is usually consulted. This kind of session is performed before one or more of the initiates who are in charge of this initiatory cult. This is one of the reasons why the diviner has to be an initiate himself and why women cannot practice this kind of divination. Though women are also initiates of *dwo*, their initiation is less complete than that of men (Fournier and Devineau 2021). When someone's cause of death needs to be identified, public divination, which is longer and involves more complex oral texts, is compulsory. This kind of session is carried out in front of the family, in the compound of the deceased.
- 15 Private divination sessions may be held in the divination house or in the open. The diviner usually sits on an animal hide²³ or on a bag placed on the ground, whereas his client sits on a small low stool, such as are found in every compound. Some divination houses have a fixed adobe stand on which their unique stone can be placed. At least during the day, some diviners store some of the divination equipment in the divination house, especially the stick, either on the altar or on large potsherds lying close by. Every diviner also has a carrier bag in which he puts his equipment, including the stone, to take it with him when he does not work at home.

The Gestural Lexicon of the Stick

- 16 During the questioning phase of the session, the diviner and his client each hold one of the forked stick's branches while keeping the stick vertically over the stone. The branch specifically reserved for the diviner often carries some sort of marking (see figure 2). As he is asking the questions, the diviner applies a regular back and forth movement to the stick which the client must follow. This requires some practice.²⁴ If the stick stops moving and one hears a scraping sound, the diviner's proposal has been

rejected. The proposal is validated when the stick glides on the stone and one hears a succession of short clicks (video 1.1). To conclude an interrogation sequence with the stick, the diviner taps the stone with one single blow producing a very characteristic sound. The stick can express more than just a yes or no answer. It owns a gestural lexicon. At times, it may show upward movement, or draw circles or wavy lines on the surface of the stone. These infrequent movements are coded signals that can guide the diviner's line of questioning or indicate where to make an offering. The same circular movement can, depending on the diviner or the context of the divination session, be a reference to the family house, a termite mound or an anthill. When the stick makes waves, it evokes sacred sites called the Waters. When the stick marks four points (symbolically a feminine number), it refers to the woman. If the stick taps the stone vertically several times, it is imitating the blacksmith's hand motions when working on iron. The sound produced is actually similar to that of a hammer hitting an anvil. The movement is a reference to the Anvil's Altar. Such movements can be more or less frequent and varied depending on the diviner.







17 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/757585713>

The Positional Syntax of the Cowries

18 There are always six cowries, and the difference in size allows the diviner to distinguish them easily. The three largest are called “the eldest” and the three smallest “the youngest”. Six names identify each cowry individually (figure 3) and all diviners use these same six names. Every new diviner names his cowries with the help of his master, supposedly as he wishes. However, the names *joso* and *kprèè* are preferentially given to two of the three largest cowries, whereas the name *bonoo* is generally given to the smallest one (seven out of the nine cases recorded). These cowries represent invisible powers which will be discussed in the second paper.

Figure 3. Divination cowry names given by nine diviners

	j̀̀s̀̀s̀̀	j̀̀s̀̀s̀̀	k̀̀p̀̀r̀̀è̀	k̀̀p̀̀r̀̀è̀	k̀̀p̀̀r̀̀è̀	k̀̀p̀̀r̀̀è̀	k̀̀p̀̀r̀̀è̀	k̀̀p̀̀r̀̀è̀	k̀̀p̀̀r̀̀è̀
	k̀̀p̀̀r̀̀è̀	k̀̀p̀̀r̀̀è̀	k̀̀ò̀d̀̀l̀̀	k̀̀ò̀d̀̀l̀̀	k̀̀ò̀d̀̀l̀̀	j̀̀s̀̀s̀̀	j̀̀s̀̀s̀̀	k̀̀ò̀d̀̀l̀̀	j̀̀s̀̀s̀̀
	k̀̀ò̀d̀̀l̀̀	k̀̀ù̀t̃ỳ̀	ñù̀n	j̀̀s̀̀s̀̀	j̀̀s̀̀s̀̀	k̀̀ò̀d̀̀l̀̀	k̀̀ò̀d̀̀l̀̀	j̀̀s̀̀s̀̀	k̀̀ò̀d̀̀l̀̀
	k̀̀ù̀t̃ỳ̀	k̀̀ò̀d̀̀l̀̀	j̀̀s̀̀s̀̀	b̀̀ò̀ǹ̀s̀̀	ñù̀n	k̀̀ù̀t̃ỳ̀	ñù̀n	ñù̀n	ñù̀n
	ñù̀n	ñù̀n	k̀̀ù̀t̃ỳ̀	ñù̀n	k̀̀ù̀t̃ỳ̀	ñù̀n	k̀̀ù̀t̃ỳ̀	b̀̀ò̀ǹ̀s̀̀	k̀̀ù̀t̃ỳ̀
	b̀̀ò̀ǹ̀s̀̀	b̀̀ò̀ǹ̀s̀̀	b̀̀ò̀ǹ̀s̀̀	k̀̀ù̀t̃ỳ̀	b̀̀ò̀ǹ̀s̀̀	b̀̀ò̀ǹ̀s̀̀	b̀̀ò̀ǹ̀s̀̀	k̀̀ù̀t̃ỳ̀	b̀̀ò̀ǹ̀s̀̀

Nine diviners consulted in the region of Orodara (Burkina Faso) during this study have revealed the six standard names to their cowries. They are able to easily recognise them because each cowry has a different size.

Graphic by Anne Fournier 2020.

- 19 The shells (*Cypraea moneta*) have a natural opening on one side while the other side is curved. For divination, the curved side is hollowed out so that the cowry will lie stable on a surface when it falls with the natural opening facing up. The diviners say the cowry is “open” when it presents its “mouth” (the natural opening) and “closed” when the hollowed out, curved side is visible. When the cowries fall in a cluster, one or several of them may fall on its sideways. This position is read as an absence of reply.
- 20 Whereas the stick answers the questions of the diviner through movement, the cowry does it through its position (video 1.2). An unique “open” cowry among the six means “yes” (figure 4). The use of a set of six cowrie shells can produce countless combinations and some of these combinations are coded figures with specific meanings. The use of a copper ring, which is thrown with the cowries, enables distinguishing one cowry from the others. The diviner asks questions aloud and the shells answer in their non-articulate language, but they are not silent because when they fall on the stone they make a slight noise. In this dialogue, the diviner seems to take the lead. Before each throw, he asks a conditional question, such as “if such a thing is true, then one cowry should come”. He can also ask that the cowry be placed within the ring. Then, using the horn that contains them, he throws the cowries and the ring onto the stone and observes the result. If the answer (a single “open” cowry) confirms the information obtained with the stick, he will then usually ask a particular cowry to present itself. To confirm the answer, the diviner can also ask the cowries to “separate” themselves. He then waits for three cowries to present their “mouths” and three others their “backs” (figure 5) or that two equal numbers of cowries fall to either side of a line he draws on the stone with his saliva. To request more pressingly an answer that is not forthcoming, the diviner taps with his index finger on the stone or might draw with his saliva points or circles on the stone to indicate where he wants the cowry to land. The

diviner also sometimes uses the word “separate” to simply ask, by extension, that a single cowry distinguish itself from the others. When a shell has answered, it is put to the side. Depending on the size of the stone and the number of cowries that have already been set aside, this cowry is placed on the edge of the stone or on the half-pod of a big savanna tree (one of the fetish objects placed on the divinatory scene see below and figure 2).²⁵ The interrogation (the cowry throws) then continues with the remaining cowries. It is only when no shell has answered that the whole set is once again consulted. A positive reply to the question is usually punctuated by the rhythm of the edge of the ox horn tapping the stone. It signals the end of this questioning phase. This gesture and his sound recall the procedure used with the stick and marks the end of this phase of questioning.

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Video link: <https://vimeo.com/757660265>

Figure 4. Examples of positive and negative answers to the questions of a diviner.



Top: The “yes” answer, to the left, is given by a single cowry which is “open”. Any other position, such as seen in the top right, means “no”. Bottom: A positive reply to the request “separate”. Half of the cowries present their “mouths”, the other half present the other side. Furthermore, both clusters are spatially separated.

Graphic by Anne Fournier, 1 November 2010.

Figure 5. Arrangements through which the divining power gives information to the diviner



Some examples of significant cowry "figures".

Laughter. All the cowries show their "backs". In this example, only the four cowries above are taken into account because the two cowries at the bottom left have already replied and have been pushed to one side and not thrown again. The position of the ring is of no consequence.

Understanding. If the cowries fall in pairs side by side open side up, there is an "understanding". If two cowries fall one after the other (one is behind the other) like in the image above, it is because two "people" or two powers are acting in agreement.

Problems. One cowry over another indicates a heavy load, a problem, a difficulty.

Pregnancy. A small cowry over a larger one signifies a child carried on the back of his/her mother and therefore an upcoming pregnancy.

Graphic by Anne Fournier, 1 November 2010.

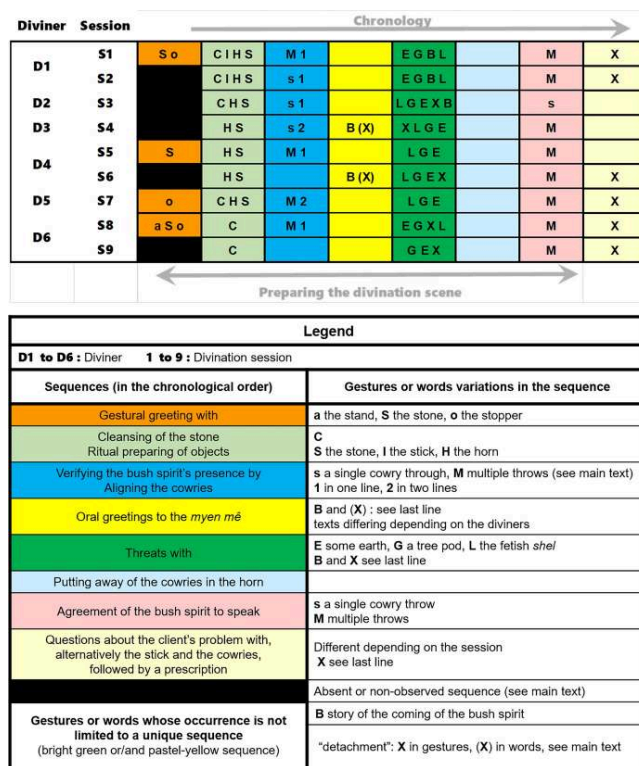
- 22 Once the diviner has obtained an answer with the stick and the cowries have confirmed it, he may ask again for confirmation through the stick and also through the cowries. The audience present during the divination session can more or less follow what is happening "on the stone" but even if the procedure is rather simple, viewers have trouble grasping the details.
- 23 In the dialogue that occurs during a divination session, the diviner never asks the cowries to fall in a specific arrangement except that of "separate". The production of "figures" is left to the initiative of the divining power. The diviner is only there to see and interpret these arrangements.²⁶ The experienced clients also know how to recognize and name some of these "figures" because the diviner calls out some of the "figure" names.²⁷
- 24 These arrangements are not, however, a strict code that speaks for itself the same way in every circumstance. They must be interpreted according to what has happened previously in the session. Depending on the identity of the "cowries" in a "figure", the diviner will interpret it differently. For example, he will understand the importance of such and such a cowry making the "figure" for "an understanding".²⁸ It is during his

post-initiation apprenticeship with a qualified master that the diviner learns to recognise and interpret these “figures”, which are few enough for a quick-witted diviner to learn them in about three weeks. The art of correctly interpreting them, however, takes much longer. It comes with practice and experience. It is here that the talent of a diviner lies. If there is some secrecy in divination, it has to do with these figures and the art of interpreting them, because this is the core of a diviner’s knowledge.

How the Divination Session is Structured

- 25 Every divination session is definitely unique because it pertains to the specific problem of specific people that has brought the head of the family to the diviner. Certainly, on the other hand, some of the diviners' gestures and words are identical in all sessions and are even repeated in the same session. The long preliminaries, during which the diviner sets up the divination scene, abound with movement and spoken words most of which are variable. It is precisely this part of the divination that is most obscure to the inexperienced observer who can see there is an outline but has difficulty following it.
- 26 In order to capture this plan, a record of all actions and words was made in nine divination sessions which were filmed in full between 2012 and 2019. Six different diviners conducted these sessions, which lasted about 30 minutes. As the ritual texts are sometimes difficult to follow because of the use of metallic bells, additional audio recordings of the diviner’s words were also carried out. Nevertheless, some short passages remain indecipherable. “Recurring units” which occur in most divination sessions were identified. These are combinations of actions, spoken words and sounds. To understand the organisation of the divination session, we must distinguish two types within these units. The first kind have a certain duration, while the second type are occasional and shorter. A synoptic figure shows how the units follow one another and intermingle during a session (figure 6). The units of the first type, represented by coloured strips, always come in the same order, showing that the layout of the session is always the same. The units of the second type, represented by letters, are inserted into those of the first type and, unlike the latter, they do not always come in the same place in the session, nor in the same order when they are done in succession. Moreover, as we shall see, they can take many forms. It is, therefore, the flexibility allowed in the execution of these second type of units that renders the structure of the session difficult to understand. The diviners explain that these occasional units (letters) must appear in each divination session, but they can be performed several ways and at different moments. Notwithstanding, some patterns seem more frequent than others.

Figure 6. The common organisational layout of Seme divination sessions



The table presents the “recurring units” observed in nine divination sessions led by six different diviners. The units that can last for a certain amount of time are colour-coded. The short occasional units that occur within the first type of unit are represented by letters (see text). Even though the colour-coded units are represented as equal in size in the table their duration is different (from one unit to the next, from one session to the other). This duration can last from a few seconds to several dozen minutes (see text and videos). For example, the last unit (pastel-yellow, to the right of the table), which represents the phase in which the diviner asks questions regarding the problem of the client, lasts for about half the session. All the other colour units are actually part of the preliminary actions needed to set up the divination scene. The letters representing the second type of units (occasional) are arranged in the order in which these units were performed during the divination session.

Graphic by Anne Fournier, 2020.

- 27 According to the diviners, some of the variations observed depend on which divination group the diviner belongs to. Currently, there would be in Orodara a dozen of these groups, which shall be discussed in the second paper, and each follows its own bush spirit (Fournier 2018, 2019). However, the diviners have not attributed specifically this or that variation to a particular group. They rather have insisted that some choices are operated by the bush spirit that assists the diviner. In the three years that follow the diviner’s initiation, his personal bush spirit assistant gives him certain instructions through night-time dreams or “waking dreams”. It is also the time during which the diviner is apprenticed to a master in order to learn the divination techniques and methods and in which he starts divining little by little. Consequently, as regular work colleagues, the diviner and his bush spirit develop certain common working habits that suit them.
- 28 The seven units (orange to pink bands) that occupy the diviner during the first half of the session or so are an essential step. If he had not carried out these preparatory operations, the diviner could neither question the oracle nor deliver a ritual prescription to his client (light yellow band). We will now consider them one by one,

and comment on the sequences of the session, first those concerning the meticulous construction of the divinatory scene, then the interrogation and prescription.

Setting up the Divination Scene

Reactivating Connections

- 29 The client comes to seek a “truth” from the diviner, in strict opposition to something that is “false”, i.e. something that is ignored or a situation that is misunderstood. It is to grasp this hidden truth that the diviner must resort to a very elaborate divinatory device. This truth is hidden so the diviner must use an elaborate divination method to be able to uncover it. The latter can only work because the diviner has previously been permanently linked to the invisible world through his initiation, which will be discussed further in the second paper. It is during this initiation that his assistant bush spirit is ritually settled in the divination house. Two wooden altars, one built at the entrance of the collective compound, the other inside the bush spirit’s house, embody the link established between the diviner and the invisible world. During the diviner’s initiation, the divination equipment with which he is to work has been specially activated for him before it is given to him. The powerful link established between the diviner and the invisible world during the initiation is permanent but dormant and it must be reactivated before each session. This is the reason why building up the divination scene is a lengthy process before proceeding to the interrogation phase. The diviner must request the tutelage of several higher powers and prepare each piece of his material, especially the cowries, that he calls the “word of the bush spirit”.

Asking for the Creator’s Tutelage

- 30 The diviner always takes first the stone out from his bag, and with this emblematic object of Seme divination he asks for the tutelage of *joso*, the god “from above”. The latter is the ultimate cause of everything, creator of the world and maker of humans²⁹, for the session that is going to start (video 1.3). The diviner lifts the stone and in silence performs a series of prescribed movements in one or several directions to greet *joso*.³⁰ The objects are held high, some diviners making the gestures over their heads. This way the diviner can evoke all of the space and make reference to everything that is on earth and “belongs” to *joso*, without whom divination could not take place. Some diviners also use the movable stand to greet and then repeat the movements with the stone. This stand is made of palmyra palm and the diviners place on it the stone when there is no adobe stand.³¹ Usually, the diviner spits on both sides of the stone or on the stand before making the movements. The saliva helps tie the “words of truth” that will come out of his mouth, to *joso* (who is greeted above) and with Earth (on which the stand is going to be placed). Indeed, saliva, which is tightly linked to speech, is often considered in West Africa as a sort of speech equivalent (Hampâté Ba and Dieterlen 1961: 19). During the session, the diviner will again spit on a series of objects from his equipment which he thus connects to his spoken word.

31 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/757664862>

32 A daily salutation to *joso* is an obligation for the diviners, but they only need do it once. A way of greeting *joso* and the Earth, his wife, is to tap the ground three times with the divination bag. This is what diviners usually do at the beginning of the day in their homes. The more emphatic movements with the stone, are just reinforcing this initial salutation and are not compulsory. This explains why the orange strip is absent in divination sessions 2, 3, 4 and 6 listed in the table (figure 6).

Preparing the Stone, Stick and Horn

33 Once the stone has been placed on its stand, the diviner takes out the remainder of his equipment, arranges it carefully in front of him and prepares it.³² He pays special attention to the stick and the horn that transmit the “words” of the bush spirit, the horn representing the cowries within it. The diviner takes the horn and removes its cloth stopper. He often spits on it. Some diviners also greet the god-creator with it. In the first divination session, for example, the diviner performs the salutation sequence first with the stand, then the stone and finally the horn’s cloth stopper. Usually, the diviner cleanses the stone with the cloth which is imbued with a purifying plant powder (Fournier 2019) (video 1.4). All traces of any preceding words are thus eliminated, and these can no longer interfere with the message that will be delivered during the new session. The cleansing can take place at the beginning of every session, only in the morning, or only once during the diviner’s initiation.

34 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/757670522>

35 The diviner then places the finger bell in his left hand, starts a slow rhythmic chiming and takes the stick in his right hand. Some diviners spit on the extremity of the stick that will be in contact with the stone. Others just tap the stick on the stone three times while holding it vertically. Others still also tap the clapper bell, the horn, the ground and the small basket with the stick, in any order, as shown in the video. This kind of small basket made of palmyra palm leaves is used daily, but in divinatory oral texts, its name refers to the payment for the divination session. In the past, payment was made with a small quantity of white fonio (*Digitaria exilis*) placed within this basket. Today, a small sum of money is given.³³ At the beginning of the session, before putting the payment on the ground beside the stone (coins visible in the images), the client “speaks in his heart over the basket” (silently) in order to put into it that which is troubling him.

36 The diviner puts down the stick and takes the horn, all the time ringing the bell on his finger. He keeps the horn vertically with the tip pointed downwards, and in whatever order he wishes, he makes it touch the stick, the small bag that contains the fetish “tail of divination”, the ground and the basket. Each diviner touches what he wants with the

horn, keeping the latter in contact with the items for several seconds or tapping them softly with the horn's tip, producing a particular sound (video 1.5).

37

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Video link: <https://vimeo.com/758397162>

Preparing the Bush Spirit and the Cowries, Interrogating

Verifying the Presence of the Bush Spirit

- 38 The next step is a series of cowry throws which serve to ask the bush spirit if it is present and if the session can begin.³⁴ Depending on the first answer given by the shells, this sequence can be very short “s” or last for several minutes “M”. If the first cowry that answers is *kutyon*,³⁵ there is no need to continue because this shell “can speak for all the others”. Conversely, if another cowry answers first, one must wait until every single shell appears “open” on the stone. As such, this sequence can consist of multiple throws (up to 22 in the sessions filmed). The cowry that has answered is put to the side and the throws continue with the other ones. Before each throw, the diviner taps the side of the horn against the edge of the stone. This characteristic sound punctuates the phases of cowry questioning. Each throw is usually accompanied by a lengthy speech composed of proverbs and of comments on the position of the cowries (see the second half of video 1.2).
- 39 Once the “bush spirit’s consent” has been obtained, the diviner aligns the six cowries on the stone in order of size from right to left or left to right (video 1.6). He places them in one or two lines with the “mouth” facing up or, rarely, against the stone.³⁶ The ring is placed first or, less often, in second place around one or two cowries. If the ring is only around one then it is the cowry *joso* (creator), if not, the cowry ancestors is in the middle and *joso* is on the rim of the ring. Some diviners say the name of each cowry out loud as they set them on the stone.
- 40 Then the diviner presents the clapping bell to the cowries. He makes it turn once or several times above the shells usually in both directions. This action, referred to by the verb *tajir* “to honour, to reward”, appears to be only carried out in a ritual context. The word *tajir* is also used for the marriage sequence in which the young bride, who is leaving her family, is praised and receives presents to reward her for the services given. The name of the clapping bell, *kè*, is also the name of a sacred object in the *dwo* cult. This action praises the spirit and reminds the participants that the session is under the authority of *dwo* which can punish irregularities.³⁷ When the direction of the movement changes between each turn or at the end of *tajir* gesturing, the diviner taps the surface of the stone or its edge with the clapping bell. At this moment, some diviners also tap several other items of the divination equipment. It is at the end of this sequence that some diviners make the client place his hand on the stone in order to present him to the bush spirit.

41 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/758397489>

Greeting sacred places and dignitaries

42 Once the cowries are lined up on the stone in front of him, the diviner starts narrating in the present tense. As if in a sort of waking dream, he describes for several minutes (four to 12 in the sessions filmed) a journey to several different sacred places and the home of dignitaries (second part of video 1.3 and video 1.7). While narrating, he rings both bells simultaneously, quickly and rhythmically, and he also chants at a rapid rate, generating a particularly impressive acoustic environment. In thought and in words, the diviner thus visits different altars, some places dedicated to the *dwo* rites of adolescent male initiation and several communal fetishes present in the territory of Orodara.³⁸ His trip also leads him to the “chiefs”.³⁹ The journey described by the diviner is spatially coherent and could be undertaken in the real world.

43 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/758399450>

44 To indicate that he is greeting people and places, the diviner says one of two phrases, “I give you my hand” or “I give you my elbow”, both of which are in use on a daily basis (video 1.8). Everyone uses the first expression, but the second one is usually reserved for hunters. Many proverbs are included in the diviner’s narrative and a brief account of how his assistant bush spirit arrived must also be included.⁴⁰ The diviner often also mentions deceased members from his own group of divination. Usually, the diviner will attempt at every session, as far as possible, to deliver an identical list of people and places but he is always careful to add “and my best greetings go out to those that I forgot to mention”. Forgetting someone leads to no consequences if an apology is made.

45 Such sequences are also common in other divination practices of the Voltaic cultural area.⁴¹

46 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/758400707>

Is the Bush Spirit “Ready to Speak”?

47 After the narrative of the journey, the diviner keeps ringing the bells and once more interrogates the cowries, this time to verify if the spirit is ready to speak, because the cowries are considered its words. To prepare the cowries for this interrogation, he performs certain gestures that he accompanies with some words.⁴² The way the diviner

speaks to the cowries is ambiguous because he mixes praise with explicit or hidden threats. For example, he says: “I am not threatening you but...” and proceeds to explain that what he is doing aims to force “out the truth” and that liars are subject to punishment.

- 48 Some diviners insist on marking the end of the sound sequence of the two bells by ringing the clapping bell on its own very slowly for a brief moment, then very rapidly in an irregular rhythm. Some may draw circles in both directions over the cowries with the clapping bell (a gesture called *tajir*) before placing it on the stone. Some may tap the clapping bell several times against the edge of the stone or use it to tap several items of the divination equipment. During this series of actions, the diviner maintains the clapping bell over the stone and the cowries and makes it touch the stone. These actions are represented in the table by the letters “G”, “E”, “e”, “B” and “X”.⁴³ The diviner may execute all or some of them in the order that he chooses and there are numerous variations to how these units can be carried out (video 1.9). Then he puts away the cowries in the horn.⁴⁴

- 49 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/758401908>

- 50 In the unit represented by “E”, the diviner picks up or pretends to pick up from the ground a pinch of earth in reference to the powerful Earth. He makes the *tajir* gesture of greeting over the stone with it and then throws it. Some diviners set a second pinch of earth onto the stone or present it to several of the divination items. This threat can also be done when the pod is being handled (unit “G”) and the *tajir* gesture can be omitted (video 1.10).

- 51 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/758402386>

- 52 Unit “e” (see table, figure 6) is performed with a fetish called *shel*, a loop made of a folded palmyra palm leaf, which takes its name from a verb signifying “to ask forgiveness”. This object is considered as having soothing properties and, therefore, it is used in several ritual occasions, for example, during blood sacrifices. The diviner makes the *shel* fetish come and go several times in front of the cowries (video 1.11), rubbing it gently against the stone, then makes it touch one by one each of the cowries. Some diviners spit on this fetish before making these movements. Some also say out loud the name of the cowry they are touching. Then, the diviner makes the *shel* touch the stone drawing circles on it around the cowries, while at the same time he describes aloud what he is doing. The diviners explain that these circles mean “we are together”. It is usually during this sequence that the diviner explains briefly how this “fetish” was acquired but this account can also be included in the long salutation phase,⁴⁵ together with various other narrated accounts.

53 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/758404263>

54 The unit represented by “G” is executed with “the bush spirit’s gourd” (video 1.12), the half-pod of a big savanna tree (already shown in figure 2 and described in note 25) which bush spirits would use as a drinking cup. Most diviners cover the aligned cowries with this object, convex side up. The diviner then performs over the pod the earth sequence “E” already described. Finally, he removes the pod after he has hit the stone several times with it. Tapping motions, identical to those performed with the pod, are made with the items called “the bush spirit’s root”, *totyán* and *dwofan* (some diviners present the last two items together).⁴⁶ Following that, one diviner presents the divination stick. One diviner proceeds differently: he does not turn the pod, but places it concave side up on the stone, then he puts the items *totyán*, *dwofan* and “the bush spirit’s root” inside and adds the clapping bell. He then makes the earth threat over the stone and not over the pod. Regardless of how he proceeded with the pod, the diviner states the different threats associated with each of the items he is manipulating. The Earth is a powerful fetish that leads to death, *totyán* causes lepra, *dwofan* makes the body swell causing death, the bush spirit’s gourd can give stomach aches. The “bush spirit’s root” is a “fetish of the road”, say the diviners. Liars risk getting lost because of it; when they reach a crossroads, they will not know which way to go. It is at this point in the session that the diviner will most frequently narrate how he welcomed his auxiliary bush spirit.

55 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/765387445>

56 Once he has finished presenting the different items, the diviner puts the cowries one by one in the horn with the help of one or two *totyán* fetishes and sometimes also with the *dwofan* fetish.⁴⁷ Some of the diviners say out loud the name of each cowry as they push them inside the horn. Following that, the diviner places the item(s) used inside the horn as well (some even stir the cowries with them) and makes additional threats. He then removes the items and puts them on the ground near the stone or on the pod (video 1.13).

57 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/760753766>

58 The cowries are now ready for the diviner to start asking questions and verifying if the bush spirit is ready to talk.⁴⁸ Before making the first cowry throw, the diviner taps the ground with the tip of the horn and the side of the horn against the edge of the stone. Some diviners also gently tap one or several items with the horn: the stick, the clapping bell, the basket (payment) at that moment. As already mentioned (see above and note 35), during this sequence, the answer of the cowry called *kutyón* to the first throw will

determine how to continue. If *kutyon* is “open”, the first throw will be enough “s”, otherwise there will be several throws “M” because then each cowry needs to answer.

- 59 The “occasional units” “G”, “E” and “L” can be performed in any order, but they are always carried out during the same sequence.⁴⁹ Conversely, the unit represented by “X”, “detachment”, can be performed at different moments of divination (video 14). It can take place when different items are used to make several threats,⁵⁰ at the beginning of the questioning session⁵¹ (see below) or even during the long salutation phase.⁵² As the diviner’s hands are ringing the bells during the latter sequence, detaching is done through words. Otherwise, it consists of drawing a cross on the stone, on the ground or on both (in whichever order) with the finger bell, producing a characteristic sound. This unit is essential because it is destined to sever or “untie” possible invisible links that would hold prisoner the diviner or his auxiliary spirit, preventing them from carrying out their work correctly. The detachment is done “on the earth” and “on the stone” highlighting that it is addressed to both the visible and the invisible worlds, to the diviners as much as to other individuals. It is often combined with the threats done with earth.

- 60 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8287>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/760844091>

Interrogation and Prescription

- 61 Once the divination scene has been carefully set, dialogue can start between the diviner and his bush spirit. The diviner and the client hold one of the branches of the divination stick each and the actual questioning begins in a binary style. Each diviner’s narration is meant to evoke his journey in the “quest for truth”, which often includes backtracking. In the first session shown in figure 6, which is relatively short, lasting only 35 minutes, the questioning took 17 sequences with the stick and 97 cowry throws. Sessions usually last between 30 to 45 minutes. Slow progress, 15 to 30 minutes and sometimes more, eventually leads the diviner to identify the cause of the problems of the client or to calm his anxiety if it is unfounded.
- 62 The diviner states aloud a proposal (see above) to his bush spirit. The latter answers yes or no to each proposition through the movement of the stick and the position of the cowries. Then the diviner makes a new proposition. Depending on the course of the session, this new proposition can be a step back or, on the contrary, a step forward in trying to elucidate the problem. As an example, one of the first questions asked is often “Is the problem in the compound? Is the problem not in the compound?” (which means within the family or not). When the bush spirit answers that the problem is not in the compound, the diviner orients himself towards a location in “the fields and the bush” and other questions follow.⁵³ If the bush spirit answers that the problem is in the compound, the diviner then speaks as if he were entering the compound and exploring the vestibule which gives access to the common space shared by the extended family. He then pretends to explore the compound itself room by room. If the answers to all questions about the compound are negative, the diviner may come back to the first question and ask again whether the problem is in the compound or not. In this process,

people may be mentioned, especially when witchcraft is suspected, but they are never identified precisely. More often than not, a lack of protection by an irritated power is identified as the cause of the client's problems. Even in cases of witchcraft, a power will be propitiated to remedy it. The diviner then tries to see what "reparation" to this power is needed in order to solve the problem. Here again a step backwards may be necessary. For example, the diviner may conclude at a certain point that a power called Water asks the client to wear a special shirt. After having asked in the binary style already described about the possible colours for this shirt without obtaining an answer, the diviner may go back to asking: "Is it really a shirt/ Is it not a shirt?" and may then follow another path.

- 63 The general rule is that any reparation requires a blood sacrifice to a specific altar.⁵⁴ The diviner first seeks to determine the species of the sacrificial victim (goat, sheep, chicken, guinea fowl) and then its sex and often its colour. Sometimes an offering of kola nuts, rice, etc. at a crossroads, to a person or to an anthill are enough. The Seme admit willingly that according to their own traditions, reparation always needs to be through a blood sacrifice and that plant-based offerings are a borrowing from Muslim tradition. These accommodations enable converts to resolve their problems without creating additional difficulties for them. When a client comes to inquire on how to influence his future (travelling safely, good results in an exam, etc.), the diviner also prescribes a sacrifice to a specific altar. In this case, the sacrifice will only take place if the request is fulfilled.

Discussion and Conclusion

- 64 "Every diviner does the same thing, but everyone does it in its own way" say the diviners. All divination sessions follow a common organisational layout, but each diviner grafts his own personal variations onto this canvas. These variations are recognized as such by diviners and there exists a precisely codified system of correspondences between them. The amount of accessories, hand gestures and sounds create a sensory saturation in the observer. It makes it difficult to distinguish one thing from the other. In addition, many of the divinatory acts can be put into a different form (oral versus hand gesturing, for example) and at different times. Such a profusion is not a ploy to cover a deception but the means by which the diviner carefully builds the divination scene in order to ritually set in motion the divining process. This step is crucial to the proper functioning of the session and almost half of each session is taken up with reactivating and readjusting this extremely elaborate mechanism composed of different pieces of equipment, of the diviner's body and of powerful invisible entities. The bells ring to call the invisible powers to the divination scene. Words are mainly spoken to praise the powers or comment on the gestures performed. The very precise gesturing consists mainly of a series of small tapping gestures that the diviners explain as "a mark of respect towards the invisible powers and the objects". They can also be understood as a way of establishing links through physical contact between the different visible elements of the divination scene. If this interpretation is correct, then the use of the diviner's own saliva on different pieces of his divination equipment means that his own body is part of this equipment.
- 65 When the diviner works on the stone, he makes use of technical knowledge that allows him to correctly manipulate equipment comprising powerful objects. Nonetheless, the

diviner is subject to his assistant bush spirit's good will, as it is the latter who answers the questions “on the stone” which the diviner passes on to the client. In the dialogue that ensues between the diviner and his spirit during a session, the first appears to run the show as he is the one putting forward proposals. The spirit simply answers through the back-and-forth movement of the stick and the position of the cowries signifying yes or no. However, the bush spirit also has a means to direct more actively the interrogation. At times, it can make the stick do unexpected movements in a coded language and these can change the course of the enquiry. The bush spirit can also arrange the cowries into specific positions, coded messages, equivalent to the unexpected stick movements.

66 The effectiveness of the divinatory ritual is based on the action of invisible powers to which the strong objects (“fetishes”) handled by the diviner refer. It is also based on the personal connection with the invisible world that the diviner has established during his initiation. It is this that lets him benefit from the services and the cooperation of his bush spirit. The second paper is dedicated to the role that the invisible world plays in divination.

Figure 7. Vernacular term and expressions in Seme language for terms used in the text.⁵⁵

Vernacular term international phonetic alphabet (IPA) and simplified notation if used in the main text (<i>italics</i>)	Comment
Items (see Figure 2) and terms used in divination	
se:ɛ divination, branch/	Literally: divination stick, a small, forked stick which is rubbed against a stone.
ɛ:ɛ stone, stick/	The flat black stone on which divination is performed.
hɔ:ɔ bush spirit, to sit, thing/	Literally, a thing for the bush spirit to sit on. A novacula stand on which the stone is placed. This object always includes a root made of palmyra cane.
bɔ:ɔ	A woman's finger ball with an external capcer. This object is also used by women to achieve wedding parties. It evokes the female section of the <i>abɛra</i> cult.
ko	A small bell with an internal capcer. It bears the same name of a sacred and secret object used in the masculine section of the <i>abɛra</i> cult.
ke:ɛ or se:ɛ divination, sex	A small basket made of palmyra palm leaves which is used for carrying things. In daily life, in divination, it is used to contain the toro (<i>ɔɔɔɔɔɔ</i>) given as a payment by the client to the diviner. Nowadays it is often replaced by a coin. The client “lays down” his or her problem by “speaking on it.” In divination the term refers to the problem of the client.
(ɛ) ɔ:ɔ	A little token made of a leaf of a palmyra palm leaf. It is supposed to have a soothing effect.
ɔ:ɔ	A little token made of a tiny bundle of grasses used for rooting. It is tied in three places. It suggests the feminine participants and forces them to tell the truth.
ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ (divination)	A fetish made of a small piece of the petiole of a palmyra palm leaf. This object suggests the male section of the <i>abɛra</i> cult. One of the fetishes used to threaten participants and force them to tell the truth.
ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ bush spirit, to drink, causticly/	Literally, the caustic from which the bush spirits drink. A fetish made from the half pod of the tall <i>savanna</i> tree <i>Azobila</i> <i>alibonno</i> . One of the fetishes used to threaten participants and force them to tell the truth.
ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ bush spirit, wood, root/	Literally, the bush spirit's root. A toro root, accessory for divination. One of the fetishes used to threaten participants and force them to tell the truth.
ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ divination, to sit and (sex)	Literally, fat of divination. A portable fat in containing plants. A condition for the <i>abɛra</i> .
ɔ:ɔ	Twig which when laid down indicates a commitment or a promise (<i>ɔ:ɔ</i>) in divination.
ɔ:ɔ	Token. A term used in divination to designate sometimes a deliberate lie, but really something that is ignored or a situation that is misunderstood.
ɔ:ɔ	Touch. A term used in divination to designate something that is correct or well understood.
ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ bush spirit, heaven/	The word, but having the essential bush spirit's nature.
ɔ:ɔ	To honour, to reward (verb). Also the name of a drawing gesture done in the <i>abɛra</i> process.
Divination cowry names (see Figure 3)	
ɔ:ɔ (ɔ:ɔ) Abbreviation for ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ	Literally, god from on high. Name of the god-creation associated, but not equated with the sky.
ɔ:ɔ	Deception. A power which possesses an altar in the form of a pile of stones placed in the courtyard.
ɔ:ɔ	Water. Also, the generic name of powers located in a section of watercourses (see second article).
ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ (ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ)	A power central in divination (which will be described at length in the second article).
ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ (ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ)	Individual fetish in charge of the individual luck of humans.
Other	
ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ (ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ)	The main cult of the Seme, which includes a general and mandatory initiation.
ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ to see, evening/	Literally, the one who is endowed with second sight, the diviner.
ɔ:ɔ ɛ:ɛ (village chief)	Village chief.

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NOTES

1. Langage listed under code ISO639-3 in the Ethnologue (<https://www.ethnologue.com/language/sif>). The Seme language presents the same tonal complexity as all the Kru-group languages and, furthermore, a high degree of homonymy.
2. Programme RADICEL-K: <http://radicel-k.huma-num.fr/radicelk> (accessed 16 November 2022).
3. A practice common at the beginning of visual anthropology was thus adopted: see for example Colley (1990) and Pourchez (2024).
4. This sequence was established by the present author through the careful study of the filmed images. The translations were carried out by a research assistant, a native Seme speaker familiar with the traditions, under the guidance of the author. The diviners were asked to corroborate or confirm the translation of certain difficult passages.
5. Even though the use of the term “fetish” to evoke strong objects that are not the receptacle of bush or powerful spirits has been considered as extremely controversial (de Surgy 1987), it is still in use. In particular, the inhabitants of West Africa use it when speaking French. Consequently, it is used in this paper.
6. This work will have to be carefully carried out as Seme language is still not well known and currently under study (Boyd et al. 2014). The few vernacular terms presented in the tables appended to the two articles are but a limited preview of their linguistic wealth.
7. The position of the sacrificial chicken when it dies indicates the bush spirit's consent or refusal.

8. Over ten diviners from the region of Orodara in Burkina Faso shared the information presented here. They interpreted the actions and the words that they usually employ during divination sessions while explaining the concepts and representations associated with them.
9. There is no doubt that the generous sharing of knowledge by the Seme and their commitment to research is at least in part what Zempleni (1984) described as a utopian hope for their society to be recognised by the colonial world [and more generally the “modern”, my addition]. Let these two articles be a small step towards achieving that utopia.
10. See Mottier’s (2016) comments on the freedom the camera can give to the ethnologist by giving him or her an identifiable role in a ritual situation.
11. The symbolic meaning of this stone, which serves as a prop for divination, will be explained in the second article.
12. This is different to divination among the Batammariba (Sewane, 2013), Kasena (Liberki-Bagnoud, 2010, 2011), Bissa (Fainzang 1986: 128) and even in some instances the Mwaba-Gurma (de Surgy 1986: 243 and following) in which the clients directly question the oracle.
13. As a general rule, the client (man or woman of any age) does not explain to the diviner why he or she is consulting him. The client is usually represented by his or her head of family.
14. Fournier (2018, 2019, 2020), Fournier and Devineau (2021).
15. Especially, the work of Michel Cartry and his team (Condominas, 2010).
16. The first bell will from now on be referred to as the “finger bell” and the second the “clapping bell”.
17. Further information on this cult will be given in the second paper.
18. In this region of Africa, small invisible beings that live on the land side by side with humans are called “génies” in French and “bush spirits” in English. These spirits shall be discussed more at length in the second paper.
19. The Bissa strike metallic plates, not stones (Fainzang 1986: 130).
20. The Toussian confirm that they gave this divination to the Seme with the cult of Dwo (Daniela Bognolo, personal communication January 2022).
21. This is one of the main differences between Seme divination and that of the Toussian of the South, where women are also diviners (Guilhem and Hébert, 1964). Among them, it is always a woman who heads the corporation of diviners, is in charge of their initiation, and above all manages the distribution of black stones (Bognolo 2009 and personal communication, January 2022).
22. A common living space that always shelters the enlarged family: a man, his wives and their children, the wives of his married sons and their children, and sometimes a nephew, a close friend or a widow.
23. It is the hide of a goat sacrificed during the diviner’s initiation. Once the hide is no longer in good condition, he replaces it with another one or, often, with just a bag.
24. The diviner often tells an untrained client to “loosen the hold” because if the grasp is too strong the stick starts jumping and no longer responds.
25. The bush spirits are said to use it as a drinking vessel.
26. The skill of recognising these “figures”, formed by cowries or other objects that are thrown, is well-known in Africa (Hauenstein 1976, de Areia, 1985).
27. Usually the heads of families take it upon themselves to consult the diviner with regards to any problems among the members of their households.
28. The Bissa diviners also distinguish cowrie shell “figures”; their meaning also depends on the figures which have appeared previously during the session. Moreover, each diviner seems to interpret the figures in his own way (Fainzang 1986: 128-129). The Mwaba-Gurma diviners also use a code based on the respective number of “open” and “closed” cowries (de Surgy 1986: 120-127).

29. The notion of a single supreme god as creator of the world is shared by other societies of the 'Voltaic' cultural group such as the Toussian (Hébert and Guilhem, 1967; Hébert 1997), the Bwaba (Capron and Traoré 1986-1987, Capron 1989), the Lobi (Meyer 1991: 92), the Dagari (Goody 2004: 209).
30. Orange strip, figure 6.
31. This always happens when the session takes place outside the divination house.
32. Light green strip, figure 6.
33. Some diviners request both fonio and money, 200 (0,30 €) to 1000 Francs CFA at most.
34. Bright blue strip, figure 6.
35. A power central to divination, which will be described at length in the second article.
36. It would seem that if the stone is small, the shells are arranged in two lines. The arrangement "mouth" against the stone has only been observed for one diviner. It seems exceptional and no explanation was given.
37. The reception of a bush spirit is assimilated to a marriage; for women, marriage is synonymous with the initiation into the *dwo*. The gesture therefore contains both praise and threats.
38. Some fetishes, for example anti-thefts, placed in the fields, are for private use. Others, such as the ritual anvil of the blacksmith lineages, protect an entire neighbourhood and anyone can individually "entrust" him or herself to these fetishes.
39. These are the chiefs of the ancient villages which today form different districts in Orodara.
40. "G", bright yellow strip, figure 6.
41. See second article.
42. Bright green strip, figure 6.
43. Bright green strip, figure 6.
44. Light blue strip, figure 6.
45. Bright yellow strip, figure 6.
46. *Totyan* is a little "fetish" made of a tiny bundle of grasses used for roofing and tied in three places, it refers to the feminine part of the *dwo* cult (see figure 2 and second article). *Dwofan* is a small piece of the petiole of a palmyra palm leaf, it suggests the male part of the *dwo* cult,
47. Light blue strip, figure 6.
48. Pink strip, figure 6.
49. Bright green strip, figure 6.
50. Bright green strip, figure 6.
51. Pastel yellow strip, figure 6.
52. Bright yellow strip, figure 6.
53. In the Seme language, as in other languages from the region, the same word describes cultivated or not cultivated land outside the village.
54. When the client is asked to wear a special shirt or a ring it comes in addition to a blood sacrifice.
55. In order to be able to read the tables better, call up the original below the image in the online version.

ABSTRACTS

The Seme of Burkina Faso attribute all the problems they encounter to interventions from the invisible world. Divination allows them to identify the cause of the problem and a suitable remedy (which blood sacrifice to make at which altar). The diviner, always male, has been summoned by the invisible. An initiation follows intimately linking him to a bush spirit who becomes his divination assistant. The divination rite uses many props and plunges participants into an intense sensory environment. This first article of a two-part study is a detailed formal analysis of nine filmed divination sessions. It explains how each accessory is used and the finality of each gesture. Although the canvas remains the same, the divinatory rite allows for many variations, as illustrated by video montages. The diviner uses a learned technique as well as the inspiration provided by his auxiliary bush spirit to decode the signs emitted from the invisible world. His body is as much part of the divination equipment as the accessories he employs.

Les Sèmè du Burkina Faso attribuent les problèmes de tous ordres qu'ils rencontrent à des interventions du monde invisible. La divination leur sert à identifier ce qui est en cause et le remède qui convient (quel sacrifice sanglant effectuer à quel autel). Le devin, toujours masculin, a été appelé par l'invisible, puis une initiation l'a lié très intimement à un génie de brousse qui devient son assistant de divination. Le rite divinatoire recourt à de nombreux accessoires et plonge les participants dans un bain sensoriel intense. Ce premier article d'une étude en deux parties est une analyse formelle détaillée de neuf séances divinatoires qui ont été filmées. L'usage de chaque accessoire et la finalité de chaque geste accompli y sont expliqués. Bien que le canevas reste le même, le rite divinatoire admet de nombreuses variantes, ce qu'illustrent des montages vidéo. Pour décoder les signes émis depuis le monde invisible, le devin s'appuie sur une technique apprise et sur l'inspiration que lui procure son génie auxiliaire. Son corps fait partie du dispositif divinatoire au même titre que les accessoires qu'il emploie.

Los Seme de Burkina Faso atribuyen todos sus problemas a intervenciones del mundo invisible. La adivinación los ayuda a identificar la causa y el remedio que conviene (sacrificio de sangre). El adivino, que es siempre un hombre, ha sido llamado por el mundo invisible. Sigue una iniciación que lo ata de manera muy íntima a un genio del monte quien se convierte en su asistente de adivinación. El rito adivinatorio usa múltiples accesorios y sumerge a los participantes en un ambiente sensorial intenso. Esta primera parte de un estudio en dos partes se basa en el análisis formal y detallado de nueve sesiones adivinatorias que fueron filmadas. Se explica el uso de cada accesorio y la finalidad de cada gesto. El formato de cada sesión siempre es el mismo, pero el rito admite múltiples variaciones que son ilustradas gracias a los montajes de vídeo. Para decodificar los signos emitidos desde el mundo invisible, el adivino usa una técnica aprendida, así como la inspiración que le procura su espíritu auxiliar. Su cuerpo es parte del dispositivo adivinatorio al igual que los accesorios que emplea.

INDEX

Mots-clés: divination, analyse formelle du rite, génie de brousse, langage du bâton divinatoire, langage des cauris divinatoires, pierre noire, peuple Sèmè (Siamou), Burkina Faso

Palabras claves: adivinación, análisis formal de ritos, espíritu del monte, idioma del palo de adivinación, idioma de los cauris de adivinación, piedra negra, pueblo Seme (Siamou), Burkina Faso

Keywords: divination, formal analysis of rites, bush spirit, divination stick lexicon, divination cowry syntax, black stone, Seme (Siamou) people, Burkina Faso

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