
Seme divination in Burkina Faso. II

The Quest and Debate in the Invisible World

Anne Fournier

Through the late Mr Gwene Traoré†, chief of Orodara and diviner under whose patronage the research was carried out, 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 at the beginning of research. 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. The advice of Ms Daniela Bognolo has greatly improved the text.

The text was translated from French by Karina Gerdau and the quality of the illustrations has been improved by Laurence Billault.

Introduction

- 1 For the Seme from the west of Burkina Faso, humans' relationship to the world also involves the unseen. They think that troubles in their lives come from the wrath of invisible powers, resulting in the withdrawal of their protection. Consequently, divination is part of their everyday life. Formerly, when inexplicable and sinister things happened in a compound¹ (multiple deaths and illnesses, fires...), a small group of elders (men, women and nephews) would get together around a mat to ponder the meaning of the events.² This group formulated a hypothesis to explain the disruptions and would then verify their assumptions through the divinatory sacrifice of a chicken to the altar of the compound's ancestors.³ For everything to be as it should be, a "reparation" (blood sacrifice) had to be offered at the altar of the power identified as the source of the problems. It was only when the divinatory chicken did not confirm the hypothesis that they would go and see a professional diviner because a difficult case requires more specialised knowledge. Today, elders no longer gather around a mat

because they are no longer considered well-versed in matters of the invisible world, but there still are many Seme diviners. They officiate on a black stone, the key element emblematic of their mantic, which works as a prop for several divination accessories. The diviners, who receive an initiation and work with the help of a bush spirit assistant, qualify the stone as “the bush spirit’s material” and explain that the stone is to the bush spirits what the mat was to humans in the past.

- 2 The first part of this study (Fournier, this volume) focused on “the work of the diviner on the stone”, that is, on the visible and concrete aspects of Seme divination sessions. This second part covers what happens in the unseen world during the divination rite, according to the diviners. They describe it as a sort of parley, a meeting between unseen beings and powers, whose purpose is to explain the cause of the difficulties encountered by the client. Thus, many invisible entities that they call the Things-That-Guard, gather around the stone and also actively participate in the divination process. The female bush spirit that assists the diviner appears as his privileged contact and transmits to him the information coming from the unseen world. Among those in the unseen world, it is the protagonist whose presence is best discerned during the session because the diviner addresses it most often. The diviner proposes hypotheses on the nature of the client’s problem and the bush spirit validates or rejects them through the movements of a stick and a set of cowries the position of which the diviner examines as explained in the first paper. According to the diviners, it is really the bush spirit that moves the stick and also creates the cowry figures.⁴ This collective quest during divination is carried out under the tutelage of *Joso* because “nothing can be done without *Joso*’s will”. This god-creator, however, participates little in the quest. Rather, it is a being called *Kutyon*, described in the first instance by the diviners as a “divination bush spirit”, who orchestrates the quest. This entity, however, is very different from the diviner’s personal auxiliary bush spirit as we shall see.
- 3 This second article examines the Seme diviner’s conceptions of what happens in the unseen world while the practitioner performs under the eyes of his clients the concrete actions described in the first article. Those conceptions involve a plethora of entities in the unseen world and their relationship to humans.
- 4 As emphasised during the 1971 International Colloquium on the Notion of the Person in Black Africa (11-16 October 1971), how people conceive of themselves is extremely important for understanding societies and shedding light on their institutions (Bastide and Dieterlen 1993). A reader incapable of understanding the references made by the Seme to invisible entities would most definitely get lost. The reader must therefore understand the Seme’s conception of a person and what are the Things-that-Guard. To understand what the oracular work represents and what it implies in terms of how destiny is conceived, it is also necessary to understand the nature of the link that deeply unites the diviner to his auxiliary bush spirit, who is also one of his parents. The first part of this paper therefore provides these references in as clear and as synthetised a manner as possible. The second part deals with an essential question in divination, that of the process of transmitting or translating the information that comes from the unseen world into the visible world. It also covers the associated question of the control of the veracity of this information. The third part presents the details of the procedure through which these unseen entities elaborate “the truth” that the diviner will communicate to his client.

- 5 The images (photographs, maps and videos) presented in this second article relate to their context the events taking place on the few square inches of the divination stone. They illustrate the ritual practices informed and stimulated by divination (see first article) and how they are inscribed in space. Sacred places that embody invisible entities to which divination refers are scattered throughout the various spaces that the Seme identify: domestic, village and bush. Sacrifices are performed there more or less regularly (videos 2.2 and 2.3). An animation (video 2.1) summarises the circuit that, according to the Seme, humans follow between two successive lives: they pass through the unseen world and through sacred places situated in the visible world.
- 6 Although we are still a long way from having a complete picture of divination in West Africa, substantial data have already been gathered, particularly in the Voltaic cultural area to which the Seme belong.⁵ Divinatory practices are very diverse, with many variants which are sometimes combined, for example: oracle by the position of cowry shells or their sound,⁶ by strings associated with the stick and the cowry shells,⁷ by the stick,⁸ by the stick associated with cowry shells,⁹ by the stool,¹⁰ by the fox's¹¹ or the mouse's traces¹² and even by the observation of the placenta¹³ or the water possibly associated with cowry throws¹⁴... In spite of the diversity of practices, the conception of destiny associated with these divination techniques reveals a unity, as demonstrated by the collective work in honour of Michel Cartry (Condominas 2010) and which takes a theoretical standpoint on divination in the Voltaic cultural area. For these societies, individual fate and luck are important. Words that the individual has uttered before his birth before one or more instances of the invisible commit him to a specific destiny (Cartry 2010).¹⁵ These words determine a 'debt' to the invisible world that can weigh heavily on the subject's existence if it is not honoured. One of the tasks of diviners is to identify such debts and other 'reparations' demanded by unseen entities. These reparations usually consist of blood sacrifices, but the wearing of metal or of a special cloth by the individual in question may also be requested.¹⁶ The commitment made by the individual may have been to become a diviner. Another notion in these societies is that entities from the unseen world participate in the development of unborn children, even if the first impulse to new life was given by the god-creator. In some West African societies, male diviners see their bush spirit assistant as their spouse, while female diviners see it more as their child (Hamberger 2012). The diviner can also be seen as having been reborn thanks to the bush spirits (Dugast 2016). The Seme have elaborated this conception in a unique way. For them humans are the children of bush spirits and, in addition, are linked to their two bush spirit-parents by a special kind of matrimonial bond (Fournier 2019). Thus, in this region, the representations concerning divination have a similarity, but are distinguished from each other by variations and transformations of some of their features. Without claiming to be exhaustive or to discuss these themes in depth, the article highlights the similarities and particularities of Seme representations with those already known from the Voltaic cultural area.

The Human as Protected by the Invisible

Humans as Children of Bush Spirit-Parents

- 7 As most societies in this region of Africa, the Seme see the world as inhabited by "bush spirits", invisible to humans but who live alongside them and frequently interact with

humans. These “bush spirits” can be of different kinds and some at least have a sexually-differentiated body. Each local language has one or several words to name them.¹⁷ These “bush spirits” live in a world that is similar to that of humans, but that is distorted or misshapen, usually inverted (Hamberger 2012). The Seme portray the bush spirits, whom they call *kool*, with a lot of precision. They see them as beings that are born, die, reproduce and, like humans, they also belong to “castes”.¹⁸ To a certain extent, they attribute to them an individual personality and a psychology: bush spirits would have individual tastes, and some would be “better” than others. These bush spirits play a major role in the life of the Seme.

- 8 For the Seme, a human person is composed of a body that dies then putrefies, of the breath of life *mar*,¹⁹ strongly linked to the body and that disappears at the very instant of death, and of a *nuon*, a sort of principle endowed with an eternal vitality of its own, which subsists after the individual's death.²⁰ The Seme describe meticulously the long journey that leads this permanent principle to successively reincarnate itself in different human beings (video 2.1). A couple of bush spirits (male and female) assemble the different components of a human person according to the instructions given by the god-creator.²¹ This couple then remain attached to that individual throughout the person's life. During the transition between two human lives, there is a period during which the *nuon* is not entirely free from its preceding existence. To free it completely, a funeral rite consisting of placing a stone on the altar of the compound's ancestors (figure 1) must be performed in the compound of the person that the *nuon* animated. Thus, the *nuon* leaves its imprint there and a new ancestor (*Kono*) is incorporated into the altar. “Only the part that will be reborn leaves” say the Seme.²² Chronologically speaking, this rite happens at the time when the *nuon* is staying with the god-creator and it is only when this rite has taken place that the *nuon* can prepare for a new existence.

- 9 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8453>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/760845735>

Figure 1 Altar of the ancestors of a compound, Orodara

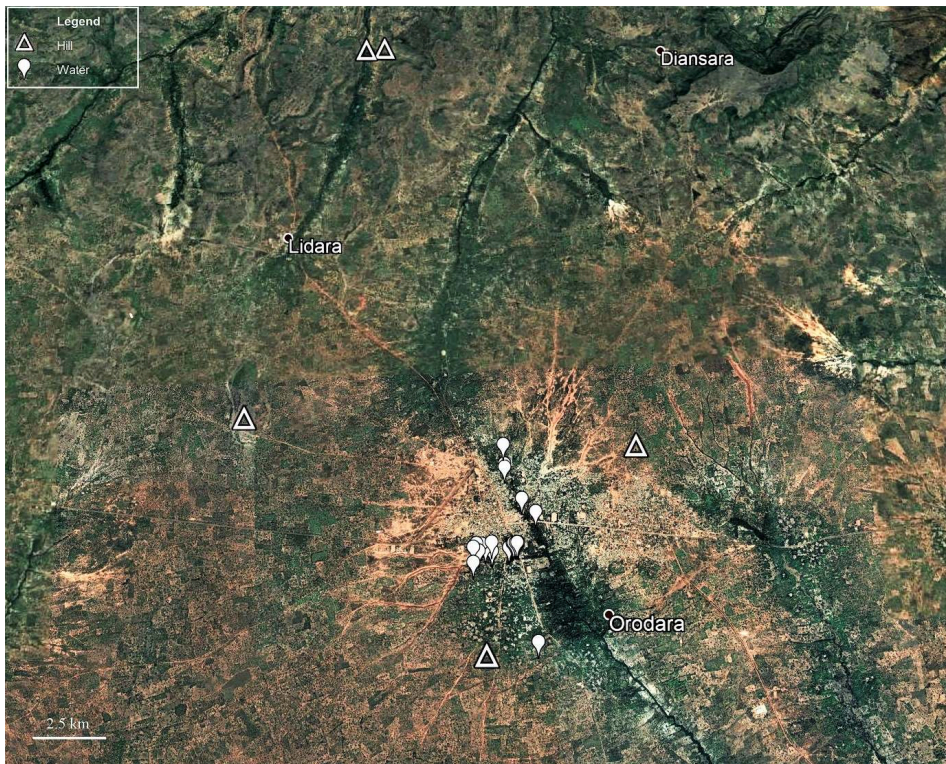


Mr Djuwanle Coulibalyt beside the ancestors' altar in his compound. Each stone represents a deceased member of the enlarged family, man or woman. Every compound has such an altar and sacrifices are made on it regularly.

Photo by Anne Fournier, 1 November 2010.

- 10 Once death comes and before “rising” towards the god-creator, the *nuon* first goes to greet the ancestors at their altar in the compound where it used to live. The *nuon* also accompanies its two tutelary bush spirits, the ones attached to its last life, to their homes, which are sacred sites of Water and of Hill (figure 2). At the god-creator’s home, a place that belongs in the unseen world and which therefore does not have a precise location,²³ the *nuon* is given its personal destiny. The first part of this destiny, which is called “words upon arrival” (*bye myal*), depends on the decisions of the god-creator. It concerns mainly selecting the two bush spirits who will take care of this new human and the number of days of life given to him. This length of time is called his “number of years to spend outside” (*wodelshi*). A second part of the destiny depends only on the decisions of the *nuon*. It will have to make a choice between different options possible (its sex, its new compound, etc.), but it will also freely commit to completing certain projects, for example, becoming a diviner.²⁴ When a developing human makes those pledges, it does it solemnly before the god-creator, the ancestors and its new tutelary bush spirits. Once all these different phases are fulfilled, the god-creator gives the new human his *Bonoo*, that is, his part of personal fortune. The *nuon* can then start its “re-descent”, it goes through the altar of the ancestors in the compound where it will be born, then to the Water and to the Hill of its new tutelary bush spirits. Finally, the baby, who in the meantime has formed in the belly of a woman, is born.

Figure 2 Map of the sacred Waters and Hills of Orodara



Humans' personal bush spirits live in sacred sites that have precise locations in the territory and which are the specific anchor points of several particular human groups. By aggregating themselves to the original small group, these groups have, overtime, become Seme society. The sacred sites of the Hills (red stars), where male bush spirits live, are located outside of the human settlements. Those of the Waters (blue "drops"), where the female bush spirits live are, on the contrary, very close to human habitations. Blood sacrifices are regularly offered at the altars of these sacred sites, in particular by the heads of family (see Fournier 2016). There are actually many more sites (inventory in progress).

Map by google earth, graphy by Anne Fournier, November 2020.

Humans as Protégés of other Specialized Bush Spirits and the *Dwo* cult

- 11 The *nuon* also looks for a third personal bush spirit which has the generic name of "the vital principle of" (*mon nuon*), but this is only done after the birth of the child. This protective bush spirit who will watch over the human is different from the bush spirits that watch over births. It is associated to an animal "symbol" honoured in certain places, such as sacred Hills, different from those of the bush spirit-parents. If one wishes to specify which "symbol" it is, then one adds the animal's name.²⁵ The lists of "symbols" are specific to each village.
- 12 The Seme share the worship of *Dwo* with several other societies in Burkina Faso and in the Ivory Coast.²⁶ The ancestors are its guardians, and its fundamental principle is to establish order in society: it renders the young "subject to" the old and the women to the men.²⁷ Important steps are the circumcision of boys and the excision of girls, adolescence rites held every three years.²⁸ The female journey is then prolonged in the rites of marriage,²⁹ while those of men take a different path culminating in the great rite of *donoble* every 40 years. After several weeks' confinement in the "*Dwo* camp", the

men wearing the animal masks of the *mon nuon* are dancing. A more complete presentation of the institution of *Dwo* has yet been published (Fournier and Devineau 2021). Suffice it to say that *Dwo*, the god-creator's envoy, came one day out of the bush and took up residence in the village to discipline humans. "*Dwo* is a household being that takes his strength from the bush" the elders often say. In each neighbourhood, two sacred small *Dwo* groves bear witness to the arrival of *Dwo*: one outside the village is kept wild, while the other one in the village has a small house containing sacred objects for worship. In the invisible world, the bush spirits are supposed to undergo an initiation very similar to that of humans. Several objects in the diviner's material refer to the *Dwo* cult (first article).

Humans and their "Things-That-Guard"

- 13 The birth of humans depends thus on certain invisible beings, but their well-being and even their survival depend afterwards on the quality of the relationships they maintain with other powers as well. An old diviner explained:
- 14 "When you live, you are subject to several good "fetishes" that guard you.³⁰ If something affects you, it means that your Things-That-Guard have abandoned you, otherwise they protect you against all bad things. If you're in trouble, if you have weird dreams, if you're sick, if you have an accident... it is because one or several of your Things-That-Guard (*myen mē*) are angry".³¹
- 15 The Things-That-Guard of a person are all the powers or entities that take care of him or that "guard" that person. To be able to survive for the entire lifespan awarded by the god-creator, a person must satisfy all the (sacrificial) requests of his Things-That-Guard. The two bush spirit-parents oversee together the survival of the human being that has been entrusted to their care. The individual's fortune (*bonoo*) "comes from their union". The Fortune is materialised by a personal "fetish" placed in the family compound to which each and every one offers individual sacrifices (figure 3, video 2.2).³² This fetish is not a simple traditional object that one can treat disdainfully. Destroying intentionally one's own personal fortune fetish amounts to a form of suicide. The two personal bush spirits and the personal fortune are so tightly linked that, depending on the ritual words uttered, the bush spirit-parents can receive "their part" or even the totality of a sacrifice meant for the person's own personal fortune. Sacrifices are, however, also made to the bush spirit-parents in their sacred sites of Water and of Hill. Making sacrifices to these three entities, those that are closest to one, and always, in principle, benevolent, is "paying for one's lifespan" (*wodelshi*). The specific role of the personal Fortune, sort of the person's double, is to oversee that the requests of all the Things-That-Guard are satisfied. It must therefore ensure that its protégé finds the sacrificial victims he needs. The powers Water and Hill occupy a parental position with regards to the Fortune. The two protective bush spirits often play the role of go-betweens so as to avoid the death of their human "child". They inform him of the potentially fatal wrath of some of his Things-That-Guard or that of other powers. In order to do that, they send the person troubles or dreams that will lead him to a diviner.

Figure 3 Fortune “fetishes”



Personal Fortune fetishes (*Bonoo*), small pottery vessels, aligned along the bottom of a wall of a house in the compound.

Photo by Anne Fournier, November 2013, Orodara.

16 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/8453>

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/760737053>

17 Personal bush spirits *mon nuon* are not as close to their individuals as bush spirit-parents. Sacrifices are offered to them as “reparation” when the rules of *Dwo* are broken. The man responsible for the group of initiates affiliated to a same symbolic animal makes the sacrifices in the name of the culprit at an altar on the Hill of the *mon nuon* in question or at a substitute place (figure 4).

Figure 4. Local altar of the *mon nuon* of the panther



Mr Dekrin Traoret, eldest of the initiates of the symbol of the panther, was in charge of the rites for this *Dwo* group. He had depicted the panther on the wall of the vestibule of his family courtyard. On the altar, placed at the bottom of the wall, he “gave reparation” for certain trespasses to *Dwo*.

Photo by Anne Fournier, Choko district, Orodara, 7 July 2013.

- 18 The household ancestors, whose altar is in the family compound, are obviously a part of the Things-That-Guard of the people in that compound (see figure 1 above and video 2.3).

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- 20 Video link: <https://vimeo.com/765375477>

- 21 Other powers also take care of the individual. Several fetishes (in relation to hunting, to war etc.), acquired by members of the family and placed in the compound, offer protection to all who live there. Everyone is also under the protection of his district’s “fetish”, to which certain restrictions (usually dietary) are associated, and, of course, sacrifices are also due to this fetish. Other “fetishes”, such as the blacksmiths’ sacred Anvil, are only specific to particular groups (figure 5).

Figure 5. The sacred Anvil of the blacksmiths of an Orodara district.



Caption= Mr Klin Coulibaly† (in the background), with his younger brother Khalifa Coulibaly who “is holding the knife” (slits the throat), is preparing for a sacrifice to the Anvil of which he is in charge.
Photo by Anne Fournier, October 2012, Orodara.

- 22 Other affiliations of a more individual nature, are taken up throughout life. For example, a baby that cries more than normal or a child who is very often sick will be entrusted to this or that power following the advice of a diviner. Thus, the son of farmers can find himself entrusted to the sacred Anvil of the blacksmiths. Each and every one therefore accumulates affiliations to different powers after having consulted a diviner or because one wants to “entrust” oneself to different powers in order to reinforce one’s protection. Consequently, the Things-That-Guard of persons participate in some way in defining their singularity.³³ They are not limited to just protecting people, they also have a more active positive influence. They are capable, of course, of keeping witches away from the person as much as leading him to a suitable spouse. A person’s Things-That-Guard are so many that it is very difficult to be permanently up to date in each and every single one of the obligations towards them, explain the elders. What complicates this task even further is that the recurrence of sacrifices can be different for each and every one of the Things-That-Guard and, depending on the case, a sacrifice has to be carried out by the person himself, his head of family or the person in charge of the ritual for a specific power. Forgetting is inevitable and leads to dangerous faults in the system of protection. Divination plays a very important role in identifying in a timely manner the wronged power and that which can appease it.

The Diviner, Doubly Linked to the Invisible

- 23 When a human has made the prenatal choice of a diviner's destiny, of which he has obviously no recollection, one day or another he finds himself confronted to dreams or to problems that will lead him to the diviner. The diviner will announce that it is time for him to keep his promise otherwise the problems will get worse leading to his untimely death unless he reacts. The person must, therefore, ask a group of specialists to ritually install at his house his two "bush spirit-parents". Only a married man and full initiate of *Dwo* can install a bush spirit,³⁴ that is why individual diviner initiations are carried out for a large number of men every 40 years, after a *donoble*, the last step in male initiation.
- 24 The future diviner engages then in a ritual journey that lasts several years. An altar is built for the male bush spirit close to the vestibular hut (*case vestibule*) outside the compound and another one for the female bush spirit in a small "divination house", especially built in the family's courtyard (figure 6).³⁵ The diviner will then regularly offer sacrifices at these altars. A power called *Kutyon* is "placed" in the bush spirit's house in the shape of a stone, usually a polished axe. This entity is different from a bush spirit and never receives sacrifices.

Figure 6. The small divination house



CAPTION= This small divination hut (without a door) houses the altar for Mr Klin Coulibaly's † (called Kiemar Klin) female bush spirit. Slightly smaller than a bedroom or a kitchen (like the construction with the green door), it is very similar to the dwellings where animals spend the night.

Photo by Anne Fournier, October 2013, Orodara.

- 25 The rite installing the bush spirit in the small house transforms it into a sort of enclave of the bush at the heart of the village.³⁶ This place is subject to many precautions because it is an open door to the unseen world, the bush indeed being the place of the bush spirits and of *Dwo*. Thanks to the diviner's initiation and his family's regular ritual practice, bush spirits and humans will now be able to live carefree side by side in the

compound. The rite has sealed a very intimate alliance between the diviner and his bush spirits, and this gives him access to the unseen world, which is necessary for him to exercise his art. This alliance is equated with a marriage and this new relationship between the diviner and his female bush spirit, now his “wife” and divination assistant, is marked by the use of a new term. Instead of speaking of *kool*, the usual word to refer to bush spirits, it is now called *tyen*, a more restrictive word, only used for entities from the unseen world tied to humans and for the altars or objects that embody them.

- 26 The shortcuts and substitutions that give the ritual context its particular atmosphere make it difficult to read the matrimonial metaphor in bush spirit installation ceremonies. The diviners’ comments, however, make it possible to identify each of the three stages of the Seme marriage that consecrate the wife's increasingly complete assimilation into her husband's family. These stages are usually spread over a large part of a human woman's life and operate her initiation to *Dwo*. In the initiation rite to divination, the first two stages evoke the matrimonial union of the diviner's two bush spirit-parents, the third evokes the “marriage” of this couple to the diviner (Fournier, 2019). In human Seme marriages, the first two stages involve only the two spouses and their families and are taken care of by the husband's family. The third and final matrimonial stage involves a third party, who leads the ceremonies and sometimes takes charge of them financially. It is then said that this benefactor or “father of the marriage” has “married the couple.”³⁷ Both members of the couple are then bound by certain obligations towards this particular type of “husband”. These include ritual services during the annual ceremonies of *Dwo*. In addition, the wife must mourn the death of this benefactor exactly as if she were his “real” wife, although her relationship to him is more that of a daughter.
- 27 During the installation of the bush-spirit, relatives and friends are invited and an expensive party is organised, but less so than for a human wedding. The ceremonies fulfil two initiations, that of the diviner to divination and that of the female bush-spirit to *Dwo*. The female initiation imposes on the new wife respect, obedience and fidelity to her husband, whether she is human or a bush spirit. The Seme say that initiation “subjects” the wife to her husband (see note 27). At the end of the ceremonies, the female bush spirit installed in the divination house owes obedience to the male bush spirit installed outside the courtyard and is morally obligated to the diviner. The female bush spirit will therefore serve from that point on as an assistant to the diviner in his work. In divination, the male bush spirit limits himself to giving the female bush spirit the order to assist their “husband-benefactor”, the diviner.

Accessing a Truthful Oracular Word

A Divinatory Discourse under the Surveillance of *Joso* and *Dwo*

- 28 It is essential that the speeches made during the divination session, that of the diviner to the client as well as that of the bush spirit to the diviner, are truthful. However, uncovering a truth that is well hidden in the unseen world is an arduous undertaking that can be thwarted by various negative influences. The diviner puts all the chances on his side by placing himself under the tutelage of various powers (figure 7). To begin, he assures himself he is covered by the god-creator, *Joso*, who created the world, populated it with plants, animals, bush spirits and humans, who are all his “children.”³⁸

- 29 The oracular work is also carried out under the aegis of Earth, which is the god-creator's wife and shelters creation. As a diviner said, "Earth is a very powerful "fetish" because all actions are done on it. Of all the powers, it is the one most aware of the problems of the beings that live on it, because no action can be carried out without its knowledge, even in the water."³⁹ It is "to secure the consent of Earth" that the diviner taps the accessories on the ground as described in the first article. The deposit of earth on the divination stone and on the tree-pod (video 10, first article) refers to the practice of "drinking the earth". In disputes over the boundaries of farmland, but also in cases of adultery, theft, etc., in short when it is necessary for a liar or a guilty party to confess the truth, people are invited to drink water in which a pinch of earth has been added and this causes the liar to die. Greetings to the Earth and threats through it are to be found at various points in the divination. During the diviner's long recitation, the different village (or district) chiefs are greeted also in order to integrate the oracular work into the various lands of the village.⁴⁰ As the diviner knows that bush spirits are playful and capricious beings, he also addresses to his own spirit a less serious threat, one that belongs to the register of everyday life. The power of the simple words that the diviner speaks over the tree-pod (container in which the bush spirit is meant to drink) will inflict stomach aches on the bush spirit if it lies.⁴¹
- 30 There is an apparently abundant oral literature in the secret language of *Dwo*. It contains the secrets of *Dwo*, myths and various stories. Although the secret language and the secrets are reserved for male initiates, some stories are also told in ordinary language. The snippets thus accessible are enough to give a broad picture of a world where spirits and humans live together in relative harmony because both are subject to *Dwo*. *Dwo* is thus the constraining agent that imposes order and gives coherence to society. Placing the divination session under its tutelage is also therefore self-evident.
- 31 When preparing the divination scene, *Dwo* is evoked in the form of three objects, each a reference to one of its aspects (Fournier, this volume). The clapping bell (figure 7 and as explained in my previous article in this issue: video 1.9) is the most powerful of the three and can kill; it refers to the big initiation sequence and the coming out of the masks (*donoble*) every 40 years. The other two objects are "fetishes" that refer to the rites of adolescence: *Dwofan* evokes that of boys, *totyan* that of girls (figure 7 and as explained in my previous article in this issue: video 1.13).
- 32 The bush spirit's root is another important object of the oracular paraphernalia (figure 7 and as explained in my previous article in this issue video 1.9). According to the diviners, it would be a kind of "abstract" of divination. Indeed, it connects the altar of the bush spirit in the bush spirit's small house within the diviner's house, to the material that the diviner carries everywhere he goes for divination (Fournier 2018). It holds all the forces of divination in its grasp, except the god-creator but including *Kutyon*, by a threat of puzzlement that it holds over them. Concretely, this root was collected from a crossroads.
- 33 Thus, the ritual threats made by the diviner keep all the participants, visible and invisible, in the divination session from lying and making mistakes. They also keep away undesirable entities, such as the wandering *nuon* already detached from the bodies of people who will soon die, as their presence could blur the message transmitted by the bush spirit. Finally, they protect the diviner from attacks by witches. In divination, the gestures of "detachment" against witchcraft are made with the finger bell, but they can be made with any other object that an officiant has in his

hand (first article video 1.14). For example, if a detachment has to be made during a sacrifice, it can be done with the knife used to slit the victim's throat.

Figure 7. Objects used to refer to the authority of *Dwo*, Earth and the power of the bush spirits



The clapping bell (1) as well as the objects *dwofan* (2) and *toyan* (3) refer to *Dwo*, the rules of which apply to humans as well as to bush spirits. The deposits of earth on the stone and on the tree-pod or "gourd of the bush spirits" (4) refer to the power of Earth. The "bush spirit's root" (5) refers to the powers of the bush spirits.

Photo by Hamadou Coulibaly 2015.

The Diviner's Bush-Spirit Assistant as Conveyor of Messages

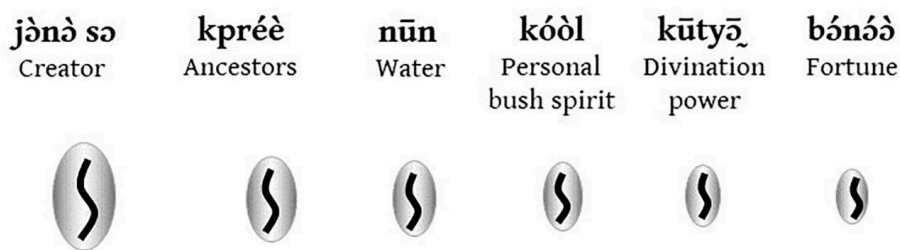
- 34 The divination session involves many protagonists and follows a well-regulated protocol. In the visible world, the client expects the diviner to interpret the words of the bush spirit, which are not delivered in sound but in visual form (stick movements and cowry positions, as shown in first article videos 1.1 and 1.2). The diviner carries out this task with a code he has learned from a mentor in a state of calm and lucidity. His access to the "truth", however, also depends largely on the inspiration he receives from his bush spirit. During the sessions, he is in fact inhabited by his bush spirit (see the face of the diviner, as shown in my previous article in this issue, video 1.3 from 03:13). The diviners all offer the same testimony on this subject: they do not hear the bush spirit with their ears, but it is as if it speaks to them in their heads. The bush spirit suggests to them the best interpretations of the signs as well as proverbs. Since bush spirits are fond of proverbs, the diviner tries to insert as many as possible in his speech to flatter and honour his bush spirit. He hopes that in this way the bush spirit will redouble its efforts and will deeply inspire him. In a knock-on effect, the more proverbs the diviner says, the more proverbs the bush spirit suggests to him. This is how a normally taciturn or shy diviner can shine very well through his eloquence during divination sessions if his bush spirit inspires him deeply.⁴² As Denise Paulme (1956) explained, the distinction sometimes made between inductive divination by interpretation of signs and intuitive divination under the effect of inspiration (which can go as far as trance, she says) is artificial because a diviner is always inspired, even when he is not "possessed".

35 At the beginning of the divination session, the diviner calls out his bush spirit by ringing his finger bell, which is a very important object.⁴³ By throwing the cowries immediately afterwards,⁴⁴ he then verifies that the bush spirit is indeed present. The bush spirit answers by placing the cowries in the position expected by the diviner. During the entire session, the bush spirit will actively convey messages from the invisible to the visible world by manipulating material objects (stick and cowries). The diviner participates in the production of these signs passively by lending his hands and his voice. His role becomes more active when he translates the signs and that of the bush spirit becomes more discreet; its presence is only detectable to the audience through the abundance of proverbs uttered by the diviner. However, the bush spirit is not the author of these messages, it is only the intermediary who makes them accessible to the diviner.

The Coded "Words" of the Bush Spirit

36 It is now time to come back to the six divination cowries which are equated with the words of the bush spirit. Each has a name chosen from a list, the same for all diviners (figure 8). These names refer to various powers or, by metonymy, to the places where they receive sacrifices.

Figure 8. List of names attributed to the six divination cowries



The names of the six cowries are always the same but can be attributed to different cowries according to each diviner (see first article figure 3).

37 Graphic by Anne Fournier, 2020.

38 *Kutyon* is the power proper to divination, which has been “placed” in the house of the bush spirit during the diviner’s initiation. During the divination session, a positive response from the *Kutyon* cowry during the setting up of the divination scene is enough to prove that the bush spirit is present and that all the cowries are ready to speak because it is the only cowry which “can speak for the others.”⁴⁵

39 The reader has already met the powers that are involved in making human beings: the god-creator, the household ancestors, the sacred Water, where the female bush spirit-parent lives, the sacred Hill, where the male bush spirit-parent lives,⁴⁶ and Fortune. What part do the cowries that represent them play during divination?

- 40 The bush spirit answers the diviner's questions through the movements of the stick and the position of the cowries. To validate a hypothesis put forward, the bush spirit places a single cowry "mouth up" (opening up). In order to obtain confirmation of the bush spirit's answer, the diviner then asks it to make the cowry that will identify the power having caused the problem "come". For example, if it is the female bush spirit of the sacred Water who is responsible, then the diviner will ask for *Nun* (Water).⁴⁷ The cowries *Joso* and *Kutyon* are never asked to corroborate information because neither will give troubles to people.⁴⁸ "Nothing can be done without God's will, that is why He is represented on the stone, otherwise we never ask God to come nor to confirm anything. It is only to honour Him [that we give His name to a cowry]."⁴⁹ The cowry *Joso* can decide to come if it wants to confirm something. If the divination reveals that the problem is caused by Water, but the client ignores to which one he is affiliated,⁵⁰ the diviner will question the bush spirit about this Water. *Joso*, who authorised the *nuon* ("the vital principle") "to go drink from this Water" (that is, to affiliate itself to it) can come (in the form of a cowry) to corroborate the answer of the bush spirit.⁵¹ The reply of the cowry *Joso* will then give much weight to the answer obtained. *Kutyon* is reputed to be faster and more sincere than the other powers and it will not hesitate to give unpleasant or worrying news that others keep quiet (the announcement of a death), but the diviners will always ask the other cowries to confirm what it says.
- 41 Diviners classify cowries as "young" or "old" (first article). The three "old cowries" (*Joso*, *Kool* and *Kpree*) are said to have authority over the three young ones (*Kotyon*, *Nun* and *Bonoo*) and use them to "run their errands". Despite its role as the orchestrator of the divination session (see below), *Kutyon* is considered to be at the service of the other powers.
- 42 Another object, a copper ring, is present on the stone alongside the cowries and is thrown with them (figure 7). Its role seems to be limited to help distinguish the cowry which lands in its centre.⁵² The diviners explain that in certain situations it can represent the client's compound, and thus give an indication of the nature of the problem. However, the ring is fundamentally "the meeting place of the powers that work in the unseen world". It supports the words of the bush spirit, but it is not part of the bush spirit's words.

Constructing the Oracular Message

A Multi-Author Message

- 43 As has been said, the bush spirit is concerned with getting messages across into the visible world, but it is not their author. The diviners explain that the truth comes from the collaboration of all the invisible powers. Each of them brought a complementary touch to a striking picture, that of a host of powers figuring out the truth.
- 44 The various powers whose names the cowries bear "are sitting on the stone", as they say. The cowries are not powers in themselves, but signs that testify to the very real presence of these powers. The cowries/signs observed on the stone refer only to the emanations of these powers which are directly attached to the diviner: the ancestors of his compound, his two bush spirit-parents, his Fortune. It should be noted that these six cowries refer only to the main Things-That-Guard, the ones that all humans possess. Their very presence is not enough to identify the problem of the client, of the person

who has “spoken on the *sin kir*” (small basket of fonio or coins as payment for divination). The participation of all the client’s own Things-That-Guard is indispensable. In addition, when a person’s representative (father, husband) consults for him, his Things-That-Guard must also be present. In order to guarantee the presence of all these required powers, but also to have the greatest possible protection, the diviner calls upon all the powers in the region. He recites their names and greets them with the metallic sound of the finger bell and of the clapping bell.⁵³ Most diviners say that while the diviner utters words in the visible world, his auxiliary bush spirit and *Kutyon* move in the invisible world. They go to the powers called by the diviner and bring them to the divination scene. The simultaneous use on the divination stage of a finger bell that is pleasing to the bush spirits and a clapping bell that is pleasing to the ancestors refers to both kinds of powers summoned. The bush spirit is in charge of the other bush spirits and *Kutyon* of the ancestors and everything that is similar to a human *nuon*. Both bells were given to humans by the bush spirits, the first to a woman in order to embellish her song (see above, footnote 43), the second to a blacksmith to charm the ears of his ancestors. It has been said that the first series of cowry throws that comes after the call of all the Things-That-Guard verifies that the bush spirit gives its consent to speak. If the bush spirit is now ready to speak, it is because the conditions that allow it to fulfil its task are met: all the Things-That-Guard are now gathered on the divination stage.

A Dialogue in the Invisible World, Well-Ordered by *Kutyon*

- 45 It is therefore necessary to imagine that during the divination session a large gathering takes place in the unseen world. The diverse entities come together around the stone. The diviners say that “it is as if these powers placed the *kon*”, thus alluding to the Seme meetings of the past around a mat, because the stone is the bush spirit’s equivalent. The meeting is held under the aegis of the god-creator and *Kutyon*. The former does not intervene much and the latter gives the floor to the different powers in turn. *Kutyon* is indeed the only one with a sufficiently broad view to suspect which Things-That-Guard may be involved. It invites these to debate among specialists, one might say. The client has his personal birth bush spirits (*Kool*), the person “who spoke over the *kir*” also has his own, they both have their Water (*Nun*) and their own household ancestors (*Kpree*) etc. These powers discuss as a group, two by two or three by three: those of the person concerned (and, if necessary, those of his representative) with those of the diviner. Once these specialised powers have agreed, *Kutyon* comes up with a conclusion and presents it to the bush spirit. It is said that its role is “to imbue others with information”. It is then that the bush spirit in turn transmits this information to the diviner, in the form of signs on the stone. It is therefore not the bush spirit who seeks and identifies the problem, but the powers; the bush spirit, however, urges them to go as far as possible in their investigations. The oracular work is thus based on the knowledge of the powers linked to the people, debating among themselves, overseen by *Kutyon* and by the bush spirit. The debate is organised and, so to speak, partitioned.
- 46 The conclusions can be constantly doubted or questioned.⁵⁴ Other powers can also intervene to explore other hypotheses. Certain powers may do nothing other than to deny they are responsible. Elaborating the truth therefore is not free of hesitations and disagreements between the different parties. In this laborious journey towards the truth, setbacks are not uncommon. It is well known that *Kutyon* speaks too much and

too quickly, hence its reputation as a liar, whereas the playful bush spirit has whims. Therefore, it is understandable that the diviner tries to avoid that “those who have nothing to say” make the debate last longer than necessary... His exasperation (somewhat affected) when a session lasts too long is also understandable. “If, instead of being seated at this meeting from morning to night without saying the truth until later, you said the truth in the morning then we could all leave quickly” said one of the diviners to the powers that were gathered round. The advances, trials and tribulations of the search for truth are concretely and instantly reflected in the visible world: they are the “positive” or “negative” answers of the stick and the cowries on the stone.⁵⁵

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Video link: <https://vimeo.com/765377503>

***Kotyon* or the Full Memory of Individual Destinies**

- 48 *Kotyon* is “placed” (installed) in the house of the bush spirit at the diviner’s initiation, an indication that it occupies a central place (figure 9). However, from the outset its meaning is far from clear, as the diviners’ discourse about it is often ambiguous. Although they first call it “a bush spirit” (*Kool*), they then explain that it is a power apart, distinct from bush spirits. They say they called it a bush spirit only because it is invisible, because it works with them and is their “agent”, but it would be more accurate to say it is more like the ancestors. The diviners also call *Kotyon* “the envoy of the god-creator responsible for taking care of humans”, giving it great importance. They say it is “faster than the other cowries” but also “a liar.”

Figure 9. Object used to “place” *Kutyon* in the bush spirit’s small house.



Initiate diviner groups carefully search for and keep polished axes of this type which they use to “place” *Kutyon*. The item is shown by Mr Gwene Traoré †.

Photo by Anne Fournier, March 2013, Orodara.

- 49 To understand what *Kutyon* is, it is important to understand what makes a person and what happens to him between two incarnations in a human body. It is said of a person who lived just before someone and possessed the same *nuon* that he is his *nima*. The word indicates a relationship within the cycle of reincarnations as do the terms sister, uncle, etc. in relation to kinship. The term *nima* refers to the person as a whole when he was alive (a *nuon* and a body being joined), but when speaking about the *nuon* of a dead person, the term *kono nuon* is preferentially used.⁵⁶ The importance that the Seme attach to these questions is evident through the abundance and precision of their terminology in this field (see “Appendix”). Here, what is important is that through the play of successive incarnations of his *nuon*, every person is connected to a long chain of ancestors. In the course of many existences, the *nuon* has been linked to different groups of Things-Hat-Guard. In this chain, the oldest people can no longer be identified by name and are referred to by the collective term of *Kutyon*. Therefore *Kutyon* in a way is the sum of all these ancestors and represents a deep view of human generations since the beginning of time. Unlike other powers, *Kutyon* is not thought of as being attached to a particular person, but rather is construed as the totality of memories concerning all the Seme. This is why *Kutyon* is clairvoyance itself and also why some Seme allow themselves to be carried away by this aspect until they assimilate *Kutyon* to the god-creator. Diviners stand up against such an assertion and argue. *Kutyon* is certainly in a sense more learned than the god-creator, but as the latter orchestrates the whole of creation (animals, bush spirits, water, earth...) he cannot be lost in detail. *Kutyon*, however, knows nothing about the future, which is reserved only for the god-creator. To explain clearly what *Kutyon* is, the diviners also compare it to the household

ancestors (*Kpree*) the other specialists of the past. The latter, as instances that operate on the scale of a compound (a family), correspond to a form of local and partitioned memory. They are numerous and limited in their knowledge. They know everything about the history of the living and dead members of their compound and the relations between them but know nothing about the outside world. Unlike *Kutyon*, they do not master the whole life course of a given *nuon* since during its successive reincarnations it has lived in different compounds. *Kutyon*, conversely, corresponds to a non-localised, unified and single memory. It is the specialist of the individual paths of *nuwe* (plural of *nuon*), but this for all Seme individuals at the same time, so that it also has a universal scope. *Kutyon*, knows exactly which affiliations have proved to be successful and which have been catastrophic for each *nuon*, and is thus best qualified to suggest new affiliations. In divination, it is irreplaceable, which is why it is said that one takes “*Kutyon's* stone” when making a divination. This expression evokes the black stone, and not the one used to “place” *Kutyon*.

- 50 The crucial importance of the mastery of the past in divination is confirmed by the material used by the Toussian diviners who also work with the black stone.⁵⁷ Those of Toussiamasso (near Orodara) use an additional cowry that refers to what the Seme call the *nima*, i.e. the previous incarnation of a person (see “Appendix”). The Toussian thus subdivide what the Seme call *Kpree* into two components as the last living ancestor is distinguished from the others.
- 51 Seme diviner practices depict the past as the foundation and the cause of the present. This conception is like the one put forward by John M’biti (1969: 24) as a constant in the religion and philosophy of African peoples. He shows that the future hardly occupies the minds, it is rather the present (*Sasa*) and the past (*Zamani*) that are important: “People constantly look towards the *Zamani*, for *Zamani* had foundations on which the *Sasa* rests and by which it is explainable or should be understood”. Although the cultural area and terminology (Swahili) to which M’biti refers are very different, his interpretation captures Seme representations perfectly. Indeed, it is also by understanding the past that Seme diviners hope to find solutions to their client’s problems in the present.

Discussion and Conclusion

- 52 In the divinatory rites of the Seme, an elaborate ritual syntax combines sensory and cognitive elements. Whether it is the use of objects, how gestures are made, the utterance of words or the production of sounds, nothing is groundless; everything has a meaning and a role. These rites embody extremely clear and precise representations of the invisible world which are unique to the Seme views. During the divination session, a sophisticated machine that connects the world of the visible to that of the invisible is in action. An initial and permanent connection with the invisible was put in place at the diviner's initiation, marked by the wooden altars installed at the time. Having become a being apart, the diviner has since been closely linked to the bush spirit who serves as his divination assistant. The diviner's own body is caught up in the divination machine and is an element of it⁵⁸. This device allows the diviner, aided by his bush spirit, to access the constellation of invisible entities that deal with human persons. In the first part of the session, the connections with the unseen world are reactivated and organised so that the true word can be given. The invisible entities competent for the

case of the client being dealt with are summoned and arrangements are made for all visible and invisible participants to speak the truth. The work that can be observed on the divinatory stage (in the visible world) bears witness to the progress of the word being elaborated in the invisible world. This word is collective and results from a debate amongst the entities invoked.

- 53 How do Seme oracular practices fit within the profusion of practices in West Africa?⁵⁹ The use of a large acoustic stone is rare, whereas the stick and the throwing of cowry shells are among the most common procedures. The Seme use of the stick is however singular in that it is rubbed on the stone and not, as in other populations, animated by large movements that point to objects or parts of the client's body. ⁶⁰However, the stick occasionally strikes the stone as in these other divination techniques. The stick and the cowry shells are often combined, but their use occurs at two very distinct moments of the session.⁶¹ The Seme procedure is singular in that it alternates the use of the stick and the shells in short and numerous sequences throughout the entire session. The use of a reduced number of cowry shells brings Seme divination close to those of other societies in the region,⁶² but the literature does not mention that the cowry shells in these other practices are named after the invisible entities that take care of the lives of humans.⁶³
- 54 As Michel Cartry (2010: 68-70) has shown, Voltaic societies couple the notion of individual destiny with an entity identified with either the sun or the sky.⁶⁴ It is the second option that the Seme have chosen: they invoke a God from above associated with the sky. A few societies associate an entity inhabiting a river with the diviner,⁶⁵ in the case of the Bassar, this aquatic spirit inhabits the group's river of origin (Dugast 2010: 237-238). The "skin of the earth" powers involved in Kasena divination are, as with the Seme, rivers associated with hills that give children to humans (Liberski-Bagnoud 2010: 147 note 78). Among the components of the Winye person are one or more pairs of bush spirits and the individual is generally linked to a tutelar ancestor (Jacob 1988: 157-158). All this echoes the bush spirit-parents of the Seme, who live in hills and rivers, and their *nima* (reincarnated ancestor). Among the Seme, as in other Voltaic societies, space is indeed thought of as a "body-space" that engenders humans and links them to a chain of ancestors (Liberski-Bagnoud 2014). "Divination and ritual are acts that unfold in a space that is neither that of thought nor that of action, but which presents itself as a kind of body-space in which the actors must each time reinscribe themselves in order to think and inhabit their world" (unpublished notes by Michel Cartry cited by Danouta Liberski-Bagnoud 2014). This quick overview suffices to show the fruitfulness of continuing to compare divinatory practices and representations in Voltaic societies.

Figure 10 Vernacular term and expressions in Seme language for terms used in the text.⁶⁶

Vernacular term (International phonetic alphabet (IPA) and simplified notation in the main text (italics>)	Comment
Items and terms used in divination	
ɔ́dɔ́ (dɔ́) / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> abbreviation for / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> high, top	Literally, god from on high. Name of the god-creator, associated, but not equated with the sky.
ʒáá / <i>ʒáá</i> power	Chief, Son. Power comes to Jaso's wife and shelters its creation.
ʒáá / <i>ʒáá</i> Bun spirit	Bun spirit: The Seme think that bun spirits live outside human world. A very general term that applies to all bun spirits, whatever their relationship with humans.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> read, on, bun spirit / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> Bun spirit	Literally 'bun spirit on the read'. Name given to each bun spirit (male and female), master or a coxide who looks after a person throughout his lifetime. A term used only used for a bun spirit that has a close relationship with humans (acquired through ties), for its patron and for the persons that remedy it.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> a bush / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	A <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> contains a divination (see text). Literally, to freeze others with ritual vessel. An expression used by the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> to describe the role of the power / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> in including the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> "ritual".
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> bush or lead to graze / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual	Literally, the things that watch in the hot things that guard. An image borrowed from herding activities (see text).
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Literally, things said. On its journey to birth, the "vital principle" <i>nuon</i> freely makes at least one promise to one of its things that guard.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Literally, words upon arrival. A sort of the promise established by the god-creator for the new being has to be born. This title probably includes the maximum span of the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> .
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Literally, the number of years to be spent outside. Maximum life span granted by the god-creator. Title usually a "keep" by according to the things that guard the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> .
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Literally, things calling tool. This object is a symbol for a special power that holds of the secrets and domains (often one and the same case) access.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	A real object in the air days. It was also used in a divination form of divination, as an object around which the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> gathered. The divination stone is equated to it because it would function as the "real" in the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> spirit world. Name of the real present in use.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Literally, stone divination. This is a ritual divination (usually <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i>) that serves as a guide for divination. The word <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> has been connected with the action of making divination which is said to be the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> (see text).
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Literally, house to seal divination. The <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> will whom the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> of the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> 's bus is said to shelter its "ritual".
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	A small bowl with an internal dipper. It bears the same name as a sacred and secret object used in the masculine section of the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> cult. It is one of the fetiches that threaten divination participants to force them to tell the truth.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	A metal finger ring with an external cap. This object is also used by women to attract visiting partners. It makes the female section of the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> cult.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	A thin "sheet" made of thin blades of grasses used for <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> cult. It is laid in three circles. It suggests the feminine section of the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> cult. One of the fetiches that threatens and crosses the participants to the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> .
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	A ball made of a small piece of the petiole of a palm tree palm tree. The object suggests the male section of the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> cult. One of the fetiches that threatens and forces the participants to tell the truth.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Literally, the bush so the foot. A locked root accessory for divination. One of the fetiches that threatens and forces the participants to tell the truth.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Water (liquid). Also, the sacred water, a segment of river, where the fetiches (with palm leaves) also, the name of one of the divination courses, that is often addressed as "to Max". Yòs is a name for a first daughter and also a term for <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> (see text).
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	It is a small basket made of palm leaves which is used for carrying things in daily life. A divination it designates the spirit world for consultation (see text). As the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> "eyes down" the program by "seeing on it" by <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> (see text) or <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> often refers to the <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> problem in disputes links.

Terms relating to different stages in reincarnation	
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Human body (when alive)
mar / <i>mar</i> ritual vessel	Literally nose. By metonymy, the term is used to designate the breath of life and life.
nuon / <i>nuon</i> ritual vessel	Spiritual principle, essential agent of life which, united to the body, constitutes the living being. Form inhabiting the human body that separates from the body at death. It is supposed to leave the body at night during dreams. Bun spirits and animals also have <i>nuon</i> .
kɔ́n / <i>kɔ́n</i> ritual vessel	The term is currently used to designate the forebears and the <i>nuon</i> of a dead person. It has a plural form but mostly concerns individual links. Strictly speaking, we cannot speak of <i>kɔ́n</i> before the ancestralisation ceremony.
kɔ́n / <i>kɔ́n</i> ritual vessel	Literally, the vital principle of ancestors. An expression currently used to designate the <i>nuon</i> of a dead person. Strictly speaking, this <i>nuon</i> should be called a <i>kɔ́n</i> bin (small ancestor or ancestor seed) until it has been freed from its previous life through the ancestralisation ceremony.
nima / <i>nima</i> ritual vessel	Generic name for the person who sheltered your <i>nuon</i> before you. The word indicates a relationship within the cycle of reincarnations.
nima / <i>nima</i> ritual vessel	When a <i>kɔ́n</i> (strictly speaking a <i>nuon</i> that has undergone ancestralisation) reincarnates, it becomes once again a <i>nuon</i> . The preceding <i>kɔ́n</i> is referred to as its <i>nima</i> <i>kɔ́n</i> . The term <i>nima</i> refers to the person as a whole when he was alive a <i>nuon</i> , a body, etc.).
món / <i>món</i> ritual vessel	Literally, "the vital principle of". A protective bush spirit acquired shortly after birth. It is associated to an animal "symbol". If one wishes to specify which "symbol", it is then added to the animal's name. "Symbol" of the panther.
xpree / <i>xpree</i> ritual vessel	Household ancestors. Collective word for the ancestors attached to a precise social unit (family, ritual group). Usually used to designate the pile of stones that incarnates them, for example, in the family compound. Also, the name of a divination covey.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Individual power in charge of the personal fortune of humans. Also, the name of a divination covey.

Terms relating to religion and to the Dwo cult and other	
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Main cult of Seme society.
donoble / <i>donoble</i> ritual vessel	This term in plural designates the completely initiated males when they come out of the reclusion camp wearing masks as a group. This is also the name of this final male initiation rite. This rite, which comes after several weeks confinement in the "Dwo camp", is held every 40 years.
twi / <i>twi</i> ritual vessel	"Fetich", this word, that the Seme translate into French as "fetich" (fetich), refers to the notion of an unseen power and to the prohibitions associated with it. The word also refers to material objects that work as a medium or as a portrayal of some of these powers.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Literally, the "language of the old", secret language of the Dwo used by males initiates.
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Dwo language
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Bush language
ɔ́dɔ́ / <i>ɔ́dɔ́</i> ritual vessel	Village chief (traditional chief).

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NOTES

1. The compound is a common living space that always shelters the extended family: a man, his wives and their children, the wives of his married sons and their children, and sometimes a nephew or a widow
2. A traditional mat, called *kon*, once commonly used but nowadays abandoned.
3. See details on this altar called *Kpree* in the list of vernacular term (Appendix). The position of the sacrificial chicken when it dies indicates the ancestor's consent or refusal for their hypothesis.
4. The oracular process alternates between rubbing the stick and throwing cowries on the stone (see details in the first article).
5. Broadly speaking, Gur-speaking societies in Burkina Faso and adjacent countries, and some of their neighbours.
6. Goody (1967: 97), Goody and Gandah (1980: 15), Jacob (1988: 201), Meyer (1991), Père (2003: 225) and others.
7. De Surgy (1983, 1986, 2013), Dugast (2007).
8. Rattray 1932 (313-317), Fainzang (1986: 127), Jacob (1988: 201), Faure (1996:133), Liberski-Bagnoud (2011).
9. Guilhem and Hébert (1964), Maurice (1986: 445), Fainzang (1986: 128-130), Sewane (2003 : 437 and following, 2013), Bognolo (2009), Fournier (2018).
10. Dugast (2007).
11. Paulme (1937), the jackal is actually a fox, Pecquet (2011, 2013).
12. Dim Delobsom (1934: 30-38), Labouret (1936), Egrot (2007).
13. Sewane (2003: 660-661), Alfieri (2010).
14. Jacob (1988: 201), Père (2003: 225), Dugast (2007).
15. The Mynianka (Jespers 1983) and the Wynie (Jacob 1988: 171) also belong to these societies.
16. See Cremer (1924: 67), de Surgy (1983: 248-251) and Jacob (1988: 160-163).

17. There are *ca.* 70 languages in Burkina Faso.
18. In West Africa, many societies are organised according to socio-professional groups called “castes” in French in the region. In Seme society there are four: farmers, grave diggers, smiths and griots. Exogamy between groups was previously compulsory and all intercourse between griots and other groups is still strictly prohibited.
19. The first meaning of this word is “nose”, but it also refers to life.
20. It is widely known that the *nuon* also briefly leaves the body during life, particularly at night during dreams (Fournier, 2016).
21. They are called *gmil ta kool* (literally, bush spirits on the head).
22. See details about the vocabulary (and concepts) associated with this passage in the list of vernacular terms (Appendix).
23. Michel Cartry (2010: 63-65) insists on the vague nature of this place called the House of God in several other societies: it is more of a symbolic than an actual place.
24. Those pledges are called “the things said” (*wutagbo*).
25. For example, *nuwan nuon*, the “symbol of the panther”. In Orodara, the symbols are the buffalo, the panther, the cat, the mongoose, the warthog, the hornbill and the falcon. See Bognolo (2009) for details on those animals among the Toussian.
26. An in-depth study to assess the extent to which the cults sharing this name in the societies of this vast region are actually similar and related would be worth undertaking.
27. It goes without saying that the concept of submission deserves to be nuanced and developed, but this is not the aim of this article.
28. Nowadays, circumcision is done at the centre of health for baby boys and, in theory, excision is no longer practiced on girls. Although today no surgical intervention takes place during the rite, the ceremony is maintained.
29. See more information in Fournier (2019).
30. The word *twel*, that the Seme translate into French as “*fétiche*” (fetish), refers to the notion of an unseen power and to the prohibitions associated with it. The word also refers to material objects that work as a medium or as a portrayal of some of these powers. Here, the Things-That-Guard.
31. Kwaron Klin Coulibaly†, 23rd November 2018.
32. During early childhood, fathers are in charge of obtaining the victims and sacrificing them on their children’s behalf. The sacrifices on behalf of women are carried out by their fathers or their husbands because “women must not kill”. At the time of a woman’s marriage, her Fortune is placed in her husband’s compound.
33. This echoes the discussion by Meyer Fortes (1987: 126-127) concerning the individualising effect of ritual observances linked to taboos among the Tallensi.
34. Divination is for men only.
35. “Concession” (compound): the usual French translation for the vernacular terms from francophone West Africa referring to the compound that houses the enlarged family. Among the Seme, the individual houses are included in this compound accessible through a round construction with two doors, the “*case-vestibule*”, the vestibular hut (figure 4).
36. See Fournier (2018) for more details.
37. In everyday life, a loving and respectful son is perfectly entitled to take charge financially of this third step for his parents if he has the material means to do so. Moreover, he could not organise this step for his own wife without offending his parents if they had not yet taken it. However, another man must take charge of the ritual part of the wedding rite as “father of the marriage”. In this type of union, sexuality is, of course, excluded between this other “husband” and the couple.
38. First article, orange strip, figure 6.
39. Kin Traoré 27 August 2020.

40. First article, bright yellow strip, figure 6 and video 1.3 from 01:45.
41. First article, bright green strip, figure 6 and video 1.12.
42. A similar improvement in performance as a result of inspiration by bush spirits has been mentioned for the Bwaba mask dancers (Dugast 2015: 212; Devineau 2019: 101-103).
43. First article, bright blue strip, figure 6. According to a story, this bell was an object offered by a bush spirit to a woman who was singing while collecting wood in the bush. Because it had loved her singing so much, it rewarded her with this instrument so that she could accompany her voice with it.
44. First article, pink strip, figure 6.
45. First article, bright blue strip, figure 6. Otherwise, the diviner asks each cowry to answer in succession (first article, video 1.2 from 01 :00).
46. Here called *Kool*, “bush spirit”.
47. See for example first article, video 1.2, 00:53.
48. The name *Joso* is the common abbreviation for *Jonoso* (see vernacular terms in the Appendix).
49. Kwaron Klin† 23^e November 2018.
50. This is not a normal state of affairs, but it is becoming more and more common because of the negligence of young children’s parents.
51. The decision to affiliate a new human with a Hill and a Water is God’s, as he appoints the two bush-spirits parents who will look after him, but the *nuon* can make wishes.
52. See the demand of the diviner, first article, video 2 from 02 :07.
53. First article, bright yellow strip, figure 6. Such types of recitations can also be observed in the divination practices of other societies in this region, but it is not certain that the representations of these powers by these peoples are the same as the Seme’s. In the Mwaba-Gurma divination, the diviner calls to him the powers susceptible of helping him in his work (de Surgy 1986: 106-110). In the first part of the divination session of the Tallensi of North Ghana, the diviner “chants, calling his ancestors to come and divine”; “the ancestors of both client and the diviner are [supposed to be] present or at least “on call”, and are controlling the search for the diagnosis of the client’s problem (Fortes 1987:13, 15-16). Batammariba diviners call the high god, the earth deity and deceased elders as these are supposed to help them (Blier 1991:79). The Lobi seance begins by greeting the invisible powers through the ringing of an iron bell (Meyer 1991: 95-96). “During his long vocal performance”, the Kasena diviner from Burkina Faso connects “a multiplicity of participating instances, but also places, ancestors and territories” (Liberski-Bagnoud 2010: 123, 134). At the beginning of the divination session of the Winye of Burkina Faso, a recitation of varying length takes place, depending on the diviner; the diviner invokes numerous sacred places, living and dead people, in particular those who are or were part of his divination network (Jean-Pierre Jacob pers. com. 2021).
54. This is a recurrent feature of divination in this cultural area. Thus, Mwaba-Gurma divination can be long and complex, “often taking many detours because it encounters contradictions”. It can hit dead ends, change hypothesis or even start the questioning process over again (de Surgy 1986: 111-112).
55. Other divination sessions (in French): <https://www.canal-u.tv/chaines/ird/initiation-d-un-devin-chez-les-seme-du-burkina-faso> (accessed 20 November 2022).
56. The word *nuon* is used as a general term, but strictly speaking it should only be used when it is part of a living human. Before being freed from its previous life, it is a *kono bin*. When it reincarnates it becomes once again a *nuon*. The preceding *kono* is referred to as its *nima kono*.
57. The Seme diviners are very familiar with the practice of their Toussian colleagues. They pointed out this difference (which I verified through an interview with a Toussian diviner) to help me understand the notion of *Kutyon* better.
58. See also Dugast (2007).

59. We will not differentiate here between the Seme and Toussian divination, which are very similar. However, a study would be useful in order to clarify the differences in the representations they bring into play.

60. As is the case with the Bissa (Fainzang 1986: 126-127), the Kasena (Liberki-Bagnoud 2012) and the Batammariba (Sewane 2013).

61. See the case of the Mwaba-Gurma and the Bissa.

62. The Mwaba-Gurma use seven and ten cowry shells depending on the sequence (de Surgy 1986: 121). The Bissa also use a reduced number of cowry shells, which is specific to each diviner (Fainzang 1986: 128). The Batammariba use five (Maurice 1986: 445) or two (Sewane 2013). The Bwaba of Burkina Faso, on the other hand, use a very large number of cowry shells (author's observations).

63. The two cowry shells used by Batammariba diviners, however, represent the spirit of light and the spirit of the earth (Sewane 2013).

64. The Wynie of Burkina Faso also associate the god-creator and the sun (Jacob 1988:165).

65. To the list provided by this author (notes 4 and 5), the Batammariba can also be added given a brief mention by Albert-Marie Maurice (1986: 445).

66. 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. They identify the cause and the appropriate remedy (blood sacrifice) through divination. The diviner, called by the invisible, is intimately linked to a bush spirit through an initiation. This bush spirit becomes his divination assistant and thus his intermediary to the invisible world. The Seme have developed particularly precise representations of the invisible world. The successive sequences that make up the divinatory rite were identified in the first part of this study. This second part links each of these sequences observable in the visible world, to simultaneous actions performed by beings and powers in the invisible world. It presents the notions mobilised by the Seme in their divinatory practice, notably that of the human person and of individual destiny. Seme divination is an exercise in figuration of the invisible of great virtuosity.

Les Sèmè du Burkina Faso attribuent les problèmes de tous ordres qu'ils rencontrent à des interventions du monde invisible. Ils identifient ce qui est en cause et le remède qui convient (sacrifice sanglant) grâce à la divination. Le devin, appelé par l'invisible, a été très intimement lié à un génie de brousse par une initiation. Ce génie devient son assistant de divination et donc son intermédiaire vers l'invisible. Les Sèmè ont élaboré des représentations particulièrement précises du monde invisible. Les séquences successives qui constituent le rite divinatoire ont été identifiées dans un premier volet de l'étude. Ce deuxième volet relie chacune de ces séquences observables dans le monde visible à des actions simultanées effectuées par des êtres et puissances dans l'invisible. Il présente les notions mises en oeuvre dans l'art divinatoire sèmè : notamment celle de personne humaine et de destin individuel. La divination sèmè est un exercice de figuration de l'invisible d'une grande virtuosité.

Los Seme de Burkina Faso atribuyen todos sus problemas a intervenciones del mundo invisible. A través de la adivinación identifican la causa y el remedio apropiado (sacrificio de sangre). El adivino, llamado por el mundo invisible, ha sido íntimamente ligado a un genio del monte a través de una iniciación. Este se convierte en su asistente de adivinación y es su representante ante lo invisible. Los seme tienen representaciones muy precisas del mundo invisible. En la primera parte de este estudio, se identificaron las sucesivas secuencias que componen el rito adivinatorio. Esta segunda parte vincula cada una de estas secuencias, que se realizan en el mundo visible, con acciones realizadas simultáneamente por seres y fuerzas en lo invisible. Se presentan las nociones reunidas en el arte adivinatorio seme, en particular la de la persona humana y el destino individual. La adivinación seme es un ejercicio de figuración de lo invisible de un gran virtuosismo.

INDEX

Palabras claves: rito adivinatorio, representaciones, componentes de la persona, reencarnación, destino individual, genios del monte, culto al Do, pueblo Seme, Burkina Faso

Mots-clés: rite divinatoire, représentations, composantes de la personne, réincarnation, destin individuel, génies de brousse, culte du Do, peuple sèmè, Burkina Faso

Keywords: divinatory rite, representations, component-parts of a person, reincarnation, individual destiny, bush spirits, Dwo cult, Seme people, Burkina Faso

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