CHAPTER 44

Trajectories in African Ethics

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When confronted with conflicting demands, inexplicable contradictions threatening the integrity of one's worldview, or faced with the moral uncertainty that contradictions elicit, recourse must be made to moral deliberation in which one's actions are consciously evaluated and determined by principles and priorities (see chapter 5). West African religions offer such a discipline in the form of divination, a process that invites reflection on personal actions and their consequences, and consideration of their place within the dynamic patterns of cosmos, not just as a backdrop of human action, but as an integral and determinative part of it (see chapter 10).

West African Divination: Moral Philosophy and Ethical Enterprise

By common definition, divination is a technique used to determine the future and to make authoritative pronouncements about it. In the context of West African religious traditions, this is not its primary objective. Rather than merely projecting the future, divination inquires about the significance of the present. Its aim is not prediction, but diagnosis. Divination is sought at moments of crisis, when a person becomes acutely aware of a disjunction between an ideal model of reality and the experience of human existence, when what "is" does not conform to what "ought" to be. Clients come to diviners when confronted with the disquieting experiences of disease, conflict, and inexplicable misfortune to ask, "Why me? Why now?" The divinatory inquiry never yields an unambiguous answer, but presents its finding in the form of another puzzle – a cryptic message encoded in the cast of the diviner's accoutrements (sticks, shells, seeds, bones). Its interpretation draws the client into a reflection about the self in relation to others and to one's own hidden desires. The divinatory consultation invariably culminates in a prescription for a sacrifice, that aims at reestablishing a dynamic equilibrium among individual, society, and cosmos.

West African religions are not concerned with salvation but are focused on health, fecundity, and power – the forces that sustain life and community. These are the values that constitute "the good." The purpose of a divinatory consultation is to root out the source of suffering and alleviate it, restoring social harmony and physical health. These are understood to be mutually dependent and sustained by the ancestors, the guardians of the moral order.

Divination is therefore at the core of a coherent religious system and operates as a pivotal institution. It brings ultimate meaning to bear on the troubling events and circumstances of its clients' everyday lives. Its techniques subject seemingly random experiences to the framework of cosmic order elucidated in myths, and show them to be the reiterated patterns of precedent established by ancestors and culture heroes. For example, in the practice of Ifa, the renowned Yoruba divinatory system, the diviner (*Babalaow* or "father of secrets") recites a verse (*odù*) correlating with the pattern cast by a random throw of cowrie shells. These verses relate how, at the founding of the world, the divinities or other mythic persona resolved dilemmas similar to those facing the client. The sacrifices they performed then become the clients' prescriptions for action in the present. Divination demonstrates that the archetypical actions effected by the primordial forebears still reverberate in the microcosm of the created world and echo in the lives of contemporary humanity. It is premised on the notion that "every concrete being is implicated within the whole [cosmic] system [and it is divination's] reading of the signs that defines this system" (Bastide 1973: 34). Divination is first and foremost a highly pragmatic enterprise. It addresses the immediate and pressing concerns of actual life crises and decisions.

Like ethics, divination addresses the interface between a system of values and the contingencies of experience to which it must be applied. The work of divination is not about articulating the principles and propositions of a moral philosophy, but rather about applying discrimination and discernment to concrete moral problems. Participation in divination and the practice of ethics alike require more than mere conformity to cultural standards of good and evil, right and wrong. Both call for a deliberation of the subtler question of how to apply principles in support of the right and good to the exigencies of everyday existence, and how to adjudicate experience in light of these ideals.

In what follows I first present two well-known cases of West African divination. Arguing that these ritual practices epitomize ethical engagement, I will underscore how divinatory participation demonstrates two key aspects of ethical agency: *responsiveness* (to the immediate contingency of experience and the human beings involved) and *responsibility* (to critical values about good and evil and to social commitments to forge a personal destiny in keeping with these values). To consult a diviner, a deliberate action that invokes personal deliberation on one's most heartfelt desires, hidden motives, personal accountability, choices, and their ramifications, is to practice ethics. The ambiguity of power – spiritual as well as mundane – makes deliberate ethical agency all the more necessary. This inquiry will allow us to trace current trajectories, showing divination to be a vital strategy for coping and for asserting moral purpose.

Dogon of Mali: Responsiveness to Cosmic Dynamic

Dogon divination is generically called "divination by the Fox" and includes the reading of actual fox tracks left across a divining table that has been traced in the sand. The origin of this practice is reflected in Dogon myths (see chapter 13).

According to Dogon cosmogony, Amma's first attempt to create the world failed (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965; Pelton 1980). The elements remained stagnant and sterile. Amma set them into motion by emitting the vibration of his first word. This churned the elements within the cosmic egg to form the original pairs of twin primordial beings. But the world as we know it was created in response to the restless determination of Ogo, one of these beings. The impatient Ogo broke away prematurely from the cosmic egg (or womb), tearing away a piece of the placenta which he scratched and stretched to form the earth. Next, he stole some primordial grain which he used to attempt to create a fecund world of his own making. When this failed and without his intended twin partner, Ogo attempted intercourse with a mound of this placenta-earth, but still failed to produce fecundity. At every turn Amma intervened to thwart Ogo's rebellious efforts. The havoc that Ogo sewed upon the intended cosmic order nevertheless gave shape to the world. Rather than destroying the mutated universe, Amma repossessed the new creation by consecrating it through sacrifice. Then, to ensure the ongoing manipulation of the cosmic elements and the earth's fecundity, Amma created human beings.

In creating men, Amma began with the formation of the clavicle. Its resemblance to a hoe alludes to their purpose on earth – to work the fields and cultivate grain. Agricultural labor recreates the original generative act, Amma's stirring of the first elements. Ultimately, to punish the ever-subversive Ogo, Amma reduced him to the abased form of the fox, Yurugu. But in a last magnanimous gesture, Amma granted Ogo the favor of serving humanity as the bearer of divinatory pronouncement. Because the cunning and duplicitous Ogo-Yurugu, as the mediator of divinatory "speech," retains an important measure of generative power, it is said that he "stole speech" from Amma. Just as Ogo tore and stretched the cosmic placenta to create the earth, the Dogon diviner etches into sand the table of signs, called *kala*, literally meaning "torn." The table represents the world and each person's situation in it. Once the tracks of a fox's pawprints are found traced across these tables, the divinatory interpretation begins. So Ogo, the trickster, is the inaugurator of divination and in the form of Yurugu the fox, is its herald.

From this mythology about the mutually dependent origins of cosmos and divination, we see that Dogon divination cannot provide a simple code for behavior, since its founding mediator is the unpredictable trickster. And precisely because this mythology does not represent a totalizing view of cosmos as fixed and determined by a High God, Dogon divination does not offer a vision of a preordained order either. Instead, from its very inception and by its practice, Dogon divination recognizes that the cosmos is characterized by change, by inexplicable ruptures of order. Full of moral vagaries and indisputable transgression (such as Ogo's incestuous relations with his placenta/Earth-Mother), the myths offer no overt prescription for moral action, nor even a didactic warning against the violation of norms. Instead, the repercussions of Ogo's behavior are extended into the present through divination.

The fact that divination is mediated through the unreliable and deceitful Fox can be interpreted as an implied commentary on humanity's precarious situation within a world of constant permutation. Actually, the anomalous figure of this trickster may be considered an ideal foil for provoking moral reasoning. Through his play with boundaries and mischievous exploration and transmutation of reality, tricksters comment on all forms of social and cosmic order, including moral order. For this reason, Dogon divination does not offer a facile solution to a client's problems, but an opportunity to puzzle out choices and their possible ramifications.

In seeking signs and guidance from within the phenomenal world, Dogon divination is responsive to the symbolic coherence within creation as well as to the creator from whom it is indivisible, for Dogon myth makes clear that Amma *is* the cosmic egg and the vibration from which all creation derives. Moreover, the mythology points to the ongoing *responsibility* human beings bear as determining agents of Amma's dynamic world. It suggests that without the deliberate, ongoing manipulation of the elements, the earth would remain as stagnant and sterile as Amma's earlier, failed attempt at creation. From this view, human beings are charged with an ethical duty of cosmic proportion. Both cosmic and social well-being depend on the fulfillment of their duty in sustaining the fruitfulness of its patterns and rhythms. Therefore, divination can be understood as an ethical act, for the working harmony of the cosmos ultimately rests on a vigilant participation in the dynamics set in motion at the primordium.

I have characterized Dogon divination as evincing *responsiveness* to the coherence of a cosmos, underscoring that this natural world is a milieu in which human action figures significantly as a force that sustains its creative dynamic and therefore "the good." In the discussion of Yoruba divination that follows, we focus on the active engagement of *responsibility*, and divination as the means of negotiating moral identity and forging ethical agency.

Yoruba of Nigeria: Negotiating Moral Identity and Ethical Agency

The ancestors feature prominently in traditional African religions as the guardians of moral order. They ensure conformity to standards of social behavior and enforce moral obligations by inflicting misfortune or suffering upon living kin who transgress these norms. While troublesome and sometimes even serious, such affliction is not considered an "evil," but chastisement aimed at correcting immoral behavior. It is through divination that the specific wishes of the ancestors can be discerned, and it is through the sacrifice prescribed by divination that they are appeased: "Yoruba religious practice depends on two factors, descent and divination. In combination they produce a very fluid religious system" (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 247). Interestingly, the ancestors are not concerned with ethics in the sense of personal virtue. The moral order is a responsibility that humans bear for the proper functioning of the whole, but adherence to the good does not ensure personal reward but life itself. Moral problems are posed less as a choice between good and evil than an alternative between life and death (Thomas 1982: 141).

Where the natural order is viewed as a moral order, events cannot be considered to occur at random. They happen in order to promote an ethical purpose and the distribution of rewards and punishments. Further, from such a perspective, all circumstances and experiences are morally significant (Shweder 1991: 157). However, it does not appear that there is *always* such a clear-cut correlation between moral rectitude and the facts of life in West African systems of thought. Not all suffering and misfortune can be ascribed to the neglect of duty or the sanctions of the ancestors. There is also an acknowledgment of scandalously unjust reversals of fortune in which the cause is not a moral failing of the sufferer. One explanation offered is a bad prenatal destiny, a choice for which the person is not truly deemed accountable but must nevertheless struggle. However, when projects fail despite all efforts and precautions or when health inexplicably shrivels, such meaningless suffering – the essence of evil – is traced to the malevolence of witches. The concept of "witch" in West African traditions is a complex one. People identified as witches are often those who display anti-social sentiments such as anger or jealousy, or whose behavior conveys that they are too self-sufficient: they are reclusive, arrogant, or ungenerous. Not only is it possible that the wicked may prosper, but indeed, inordinate prosperity is suspect as an indication of witchcraft! The source of evil is located in the human world, and lurks in the heart of the hidden person (Marwick 1987: 424). It is diviners who can identify the witch plaguing a client and who, on occasion, may cause the accused culprit to confess and relent. Diviners and witches are often represented as opposites and agonists: witches operate in darkness and secrecy, diviners practice by day in public places; witches veil their activities and obscure their power, the diviner is to serve as a medium of revelation so that the invisible can be given form for all to see; witches intercede to cause sickness and impede success, diviners intervene to diagnose illness or the cause of misfortune, prescribe remedy and protection, and promote the flourishing of destiny.

A closer look at how people use the term "witch" and conceive of witchcraft reveals that in fact an opposition between "diviner" as a force of "good" and "witch" as source of "evil" is too simplistic. Most traditional African societies hold to the belief that certain people are able to use supernatural means for their own ends. Their power is great, but ambiguous. It can be used for good or evil, to protect or destroy life. Yoruba tradition maintains that life-sustaining "power" (*ase*) is an ambivalent force. Its ambivalent nature requires that it be harnessed by culture for the greater good (cf. Drewal and Drewal 1983). So witches derive their power from the same supreme creator god who invests the entire cosmos with its creative impulse. Witches choose to exercise it for evil (see Abimbola 1977).

Many interpreters of African cultures offer a socially pragmatic basis for belief in witchcraft, emphasizing the frustration and aggression that arises within the restricting conditions of a "closed society," one that relies on harmonious relations. Fear of accusation and its repercussions ensures that standards of appropriate moral conduct are scrupulously maintained. However, the ramifications of both accusations and confessions of witchcraft belie this explanation. Rather than serving to alleviate hostilities, the identification of a witch usually increases social tension. Adherence to beliefs in witchcraft actually undermines moral behavior, since it encourages subterfuge and suspicion about others. Belief in witchcraft, in other words, entails a moral system that

acknowledges the existence of moral ambiguity and the ambivalent and hidden quality of personal motives, and calls for a process that will attend to these more complex problems.

Because power is ambiguous, the potential for witchcraft is understood to be innate and unconscious. The election of divination as a means of confronting one's hidden motives is an ethical act, for it ensures the proper and responsible direction of personal destiny. The Yoruba recognize that evil intentions are not readily apparent but belong to that occult dimension of the human being to which only divination offers access. "God forgot to split the feet of a duck, and a crane uses its leg as a tail; but no one can recognize the footprints of a cruel man" (Clarke 1939: 249). Divination is a means to explore otherwise unexamined motives and hidden dynamics that reveals one's moral "footprint." Moreover, divination strengthens that inner core of deliberate intention that provides protection as well as moral resolve. Abimbola represents the Yoruba approach in this way: "When a person is troubled by the *àjé* (witches), he is encouraged to call on his own *orí* [literally, "head," the seat of the self and personal destiny revealed through divination] which he chose for himself shortly before he left *òrun* (heaven) for the earth" (Abimbola 1977: 82). Sacrifices are made to the *orí* to promote the flourishing of destiny, for the type of *orí* chosen before birth – the very nature of one's destiny – remains unknowable, a mystery that can only be guessed at the end of one's life (Abimbola 1973: 87). It is left to each person to make every attempt to enhance the full potential of his or her allotted destiny through wise choices and proper action; and for this, divination is an essential guide.

Every divinatory inquiry entails an implicit awareness of the competing interests of the public persona and the inner self. The tension between individual and collective, inner and outer self is an ethical dilemma, and while it can never be finally resolved, the ongoing permutations in the dynamic can be negotiated. While clients of divination may come with personal decisions and seemingly private ills, the process necessarily calls upon clients to "formulate and continually revise their moral identity," that is, one established in concert with that of the community, both social and spiritual (Johnson 1993: 126). In order to resolve a dilemma, divination situates the individual within the nexus of relations.

In calling upon the client's sense of responsibility to self and other, divination radically contests a view of a moral person as essentially an atomistic, rational ego, applying universal principles or absolute mandates uniformly. Divination involves an ongoing negotiation between individual and society, and rests on the assumption that no absolute moral law is universally viable. Furthermore, it undercuts the view that "traditional" societies enforce a univocal decree of requirement for action.

Trajectories for West African Ethics

In the context of West African traditions, divination is the core of a pragmatic religious system. In the ethnically heterogeneous context of the city, though, diviners and their clients do not necessarily share a common ethnic origin. Here, divination cannot rely on standard conventions to make its practices coherent and persuasive. There is no

common mythic model upon which experience can be predicated and the ritual cannot necessarily exploit a common symbolic lexicon.

Nevertheless, in the West African metropolis of Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), amid skyscrapers and traffic jams, diviners are, in fact, very present, strategically placed on street corners and in marketplaces, or operating in recessed courtyards and consulting rooms off bustling streets. Clients come with their most pressing concerns, confident in the efficacy of divinatory techniques to cast their misfortune into manageable terms. The lively presence of divination in Abidjan (as in other West African cities) is an indication that such ritual is not a thing of the past but vividly relevant in the contemporary scene. Extracted from the traditional milieu, does urban divinatory practice still operate as an ethical system in which responsibility and responsiveness are critical components?

The indigenous population of Côte d'Ivoire is comprised of over 60 distinct ethnic peoples. In addition, the long-term political stability and relative economic prosperity drew immigrants and refugees from all over West Africa. The techniques of urban divination are as varied as the many ethnic neighborhoods that comprise Abidjan. While traditional practices flourish, signs advertising clairvoyants and "consultants" who use palmistry, astrology, or tarot also lure the urban clientele. The impressive array of alternative divinatory techniques being practiced in Abidjan strikingly represents the kaleidoscopic quality of religiosity in this city in creative flux and recombination. The prevalence of divination in Abidjan reflects the urban plight even as it provides clients with a means of addressing the acute distress that a modern metropolis engenders. Clients are compelled to seek out divination in light of the social dysfunction of "underdevelopment" and the alienation of the city. Urban diviners are often themselves economic refugees, no longer functioning as ritual specialists in the service of community, but as paid professionals who cater to a clientele of individuals. The promising talents of diviners advertised on billboards are presented like other commodities on the market. The practices reflect the capitalist and individualistic milieu in which they now operate.

These trends do not mean, however, that the ritual process has undergone degeneration to the degree that it no longer holds value as an ethical enterprise. While there is no effort on the part of diviners or their clientele to appeal to an entire, cohesive tradition, urban divination is genuinely grounded in its traditional techniques, and these have always been innovative and adaptive. Even the most consistent of divinatory systems, such as Ifa which requires that every diviner undergo rigorous training and ritual initiation before being admitted into the coterie of specialists, has always included innovation. For example, Ifa diviners invent new *odù*, interpretive verses associated with the ideograms cast by the random fall of kola nuts (William 1966: 408–21). This seems to defy the common assertion that the verses constitute a fixed canon of the Yoruba divinatory technique. Moreover, many traditional divinatory forms exist in which there is no systematic interpretation of signs. Diviners readily admit that even among those who use identical techniques there is no consensus about the meaning of the patterns cast, and that the rules of interpretation are few. What is consistent and authentic in both traditional and urban contexts is the appeal to the practice of divination itself and to the underlying premises that support it.

Contemporary clients continue to perceive a need for protection and release from the tyranny of invisible forces, for even in the city there persists the conviction that, along

with the empirically demonstrable facts of underdevelopment, it is the elusive powers of spirits, witches, and spells that undermine life. Divination provides a sense of empowerment by enabling the client to consider the crisis at hand from the overarching vantage point of cosmic dynamics. It allows the client to envision possibilities for control and relief to problems that might otherwise remain beyond the purview of his or her ability to act (see Jackson 1989). As Guedou Joseph, a practitioner of Fa from Benin put it, "God says, 'get up and lift your heavy load and I will help you load it onto your head' [where it can be carried]. When you make sacrifice you lift your burden, and God places it on your head."

Urban divination offers clients a critical alternative to Western, materialist appraisals of the problems of modernity that plague them. Rather than capitulating to the economic rhetoric of development theory to explain the inevitability of the paucity of jobs, the lack of access to adequate healthcare, corruption, bureaucratic mismanagement, and other facts of daily existence, urban West Africans turn to divination as an explanatory frame. It asserts that circumstance must be interpreted in terms of less tangible realities and that destiny must be negotiated accordingly (see van Binsbergen 1995). The potent appeal of urban divination is that it revivifies underlying precepts and values, even as it asserts an alternative interpretation of the miseries that plague the typical inhabitant of the city.

In the urban sphere ancestors play a significantly reduced role. They are neither the source of divinatory messages nor recipients of propitiatory offerings. Rather, it is personal spirits, more anonymous and nebulous, who intercede in the negotiation of destiny. Urban divinatory prescriptions are more individual and therapeutic than political. For example, rather than being asked to sacrifice a goat in a public ritual and distribute meat to relatives involved in a dispute, a client might be asked to wash her face in milk, and leave a kola nut at a crossroad. Furthermore, urban diviners repeatedly assert that a client makes sacrifices not to appease either personal spirits or ancestors, but rather to empower his or her own soul or spiritual double. At first glance, this adjustment seems to reflect adaptation to the anonymous urban situation, where moral precepts can no longer be sustained by adherence to traditional values or community life. However, it is ultimately no different from the Yoruba appeal to one's own *orí*, or "head," as the seat of personal destiny that must be propitiated in order to properly unfold. Divinatory sacrifice is so pervasive that beggars install themselves at busy crossroads where they are certain to secure daily alms. Reinforced by mutual good will, sacrifice elicits a visible acknowledgment of a trans-ethnic African identity. It binds the hybrid population into a visibly coherent moral community.

By validating the reality of essential common postulates like witchcraft as the source of evil and the corrective power of sacrifice, divination has contributed to a popular sense of transnational affiliation across political boundaries. These "traditional" notions are increasingly becoming the hallmarks of a "new amalgam" identity which is clearly being forged today among urban West Africans from various countries, who readily assert that there is no difference among them (Jules-Rosette 1979: 226). This new sense of identity does not fall back on the largely bankrupt notion of citizenship that has had little to offer contemporary Africans whose nations are rife with civil wars, on a continent where the extent of refugee migration lends new meaning to the term

"African Diaspora." The highly visible and vital practices of urban divination rely on a worldview that transcends ethnic boundaries and reinforce an ethos that binds and sustains community. Divination redefines problems in terms of a familiar interpretive framework and transcribes the dynamics of power into idioms that have currency across West Africa. Drawing on this overarching schema, urban divination represents a vital link to the indigenous religious world of meaning even as it shapes contemporary social reality.

In the urban situation every instance of divination is a deliberate undertaking, for it is the client who decides to initiate an inquiry. The client retains a large measure of control over the entire ritual process, from the choice of a diviner to participation in the interpretation of the signs, including the decision whether to accord it any authority at all. No prescription is enforced. It is up to the client whether to perform the recommended sacrifice, or to ignore the prescription and perhaps consult yet another diviner. Thus, divination calls for a constant appraisal of the choices and ramifications of action open to its participants. At the same time it provides for the kind of deliberation and decision making that give principled direction to action. Ultimately, however, divination recommends the individual to the community through sacrifice. In this way the divinatory process straddles the stereotypical thought/action dichotomy in an important way. Its ritual is not an unreflected exercise of repetition, and its foundational beliefs are not unquestioned. Instead, through divination, belief is exercised and practice is deliberated.

In the alienating context of contemporary urban life, where the negotiation of daily existence is increasingly difficult and unpredictable, divination is perhaps more critical than ever as a mechanism by which a sense of communal identity and moral purpose can be asserted, and a sense of personal agency is grasped and affirmed. This makes it easy to predict that divination will certainly continue to assert itself as a critical component of urban life and a vital affirmation of what may be considered a distinctively West African ethic.

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