

22 Signs, Doors, and Games

Divination's Dynamic Visual Canon

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The Signs: A Visual Canon

One of the foremost interpreters of Yorùbá divination, William Bascom, boldly asserted that the verses associated with the signs of Ifá and recited by the babalawo are the critical interpretive standard of this system. Bascom gives the verses the status of a canon for Yorùbá culture, claiming that “these verses constitute their unwritten scriptures” (1969a, 11). I suggest that as rich and valuable as this oral literature is, it would nevertheless be a mistake to ascribe to the verses the status of a fixed and authoritative canon. Rather, I contend that it is the set of 256 signs, the *odu* “signatures of Ifá” themselves, that comprise Ifá’s canon. They fix in concrete visual form a catalogue of the normative. While the verses are numberless and open to innovation, Ifá’s set of signs is closed and unchanging. As a *visual canon*, Ifá encodes fundamental principles, ideals, and norms of culture in the material emblems of its art.

Because sacred scriptures generally are held in the highest esteem by scholars of religion, who look to these written texts as the definitive articulations of a tradition’s self-understanding and the basis for its moral philosophy, it is natural that those wishing to redeem African religious traditions from the secondary place to which they were mistakenly relegated would wish to promote the analogy between the Christian canon and the Ifá verses. However, “the overreliance on ‘text’ as the genre privileged with unique intelligibility severely restricts” the interpretation of other, equally expressive religious realities, such as ritual performance (Sullivan 1987, 772–773n169). Properly understood, the words spoken in a ritual context—and the Ifá verses in particular—should not be treated as “text”; “they are stylized semantic fields whose specific forms of expression are themselves symbolic and significant” (ibid.). Certainly in Ifá the verbal and vi-

sual components do work in conjunction. My point is that the “textual” coherence of the verses is only apparent in the performance of the divinatory ritual, as commentary on the dynamic interplay of the signs.

In applying the term “canon” to the visual iconography of divinatory practices, I aim to blur the distinction between “texts” and “objects” in order to underscore how, in West Africa, critical discourse about the nature of divinity, the dynamics of the cosmos, and the place of the person in it is forcefully embodied in the plastic arts and ritual practice.

In what follows, I draw analogies between Ifá and the divinatory system of the Dogon of Mali to show how these two equally well-documented though very disparate forms of West African divination both operate on the basis of a dynamic, visual canon. My object is not to promote the primacy of one over the other, nor to explore the possibility of a mutual influence or common source. Rather, the comparison lends weight to the idea that the signs constitute the divinatory canon. A comparative analysis strengthens the argument, even as it opens avenues for reflection on a foundational West African epistemology that I suggest undergirds both systems.¹

The Dynamics of Divination: The Fixed and the Random

Iconography of an Enigma

Divination is sought at moments of crisis, when a person experiences an acute disjunction between an ideal model of reality and the real contingencies of experience, when what “is” does not conform to what “ought” to be. Clients come to diviners seeking clarity, insight, and guidance. However, divination proceeds along a paradoxical course. Rather than offering explicit explanation, divination responds with another puzzle. The divinatory “word” comes in the form of an image, a conjunction of symbols physically cast into new combination: palm nuts, cowries, stones, and bones are beaten, cast, tossed, and shaken into recombining arrangements in various divinatory practices. Moreover, the arrangement of these elements does not encode a one-to-one symbolic correspondence (in which, for example, heads means “yes” and tails “no”). Rather, bundles of meaning with various referents are conveyed simultaneously, like visual poems. To further complicate matters, these configurations are superimposed upon templates, such as a divining tray or table, which are themselves replete with visual imagery, rich with significance. These palimpsests graphically represent the world while the signs indicate the complex nature of experience within it. Together, they construct what anthropologist James W. Fernandez (1986, 206) calls an “argument of images,” one that is, even without the embellishment of words, verses or other “text,” richly suggestive.

The Origin of the Signs: Making Order

The order and arrangement of the divinatory signs as a complete system is a critical aspect of a Yorùbá diviner's training, for knowledge about their construction and relative placement is fundamental for determining their meaning. The sheer abundance of stories and myths explaining and commenting upon the visual structure and arrangement of the signs is one clear indicator that the *odu* system, as an entity in its own right, is critical. In fact, mythology traces the origins of the *odu* to the very inception of the world.²

Among the many mythic accounts of the origin of the *odu* and Ifá divination, all show the sixteen principal *odu* to be consubstantial with powerful primordial beings. McClelland called them "the earthly counterparts of heavenly beings" (1966, 424). One tells how the supreme divinity, Olodumare, hatched from an enormous egg, the first of sixteen divine beings to emerge from it.³ Being the senior in rank, Olodumare, the Supreme Being, sent the younger divinity Orunmila to make the earth and to set human beings upon it. All sixteen (eight pairs of twins) eventually descended to do Olodumare's bidding. In a sort of reverse apotheosis, all of the divinities in this pantheon are said to have become Yorùbá ancestral kings and culture heroes whose personal trials and adventures established the precedent for all human experience. Orunmila initiated the original sixteen twins as Ifá diviners. These world-defining entities left their "signature" upon the practice, the *odu*.

The order of the *odu* figures in the divinatory schema indicates the order in which each divinity is said to have arrived in Ile-Ife, the mythic center of the world, birthplace of humanity, and the first Yorùbá city.⁴ Bascom (1969b) calls this Yorùbá cosmology "charmingly ethnocentric," for it identifies Ile-Ife not only as the first city but as the axis mundi itself. Here, it is said, divination was first established as the means by which humans would maintain access to the divinities after they retreated into the heavens. Only at this point were human beings initiated as practitioners of Ifá and able to become the first babalawos, the "fathers of secrets."

Another version says that Olodumare himself settled in Ile-Ife and was its first inhabitant. There he set in the earth a palm nut tree with sixteen branches.⁵ Sixteen holes were dug around the tree, and into each fell sixteen palm nuts. This yielded the 256 (or 16²) possible outcomes of Ifá divination, the number of signs in the system (Maupoil 1981, 36). The signs are subsequently identified with each of the divinities to descend to the earthly city.

A particularly vivid representation of this schema shows all 256 possible variations of the *odu* as a succession of royal visits. The first and most important *odu*, Eji Ogbe, makes fifteen visits to other less powerful kingdoms, and is visited fifteen times in turn. Each lesser-ranking figure only visits those of inferior rank,

and therefore makes fewer total rounds. "One [informant] explained that Orunmila arranged this scheme *so that 'all the world' could come into contact . . . before they went back to heaven*" (McClelland 1966, 425, emphasis mine). Plotting out the *odu* in this way one can see the entire order and arrangement of the signs as a progression forward and back, a journey that establishes the world.⁶

Other myths, as well as elements of the verses associated with the *odu*, depict the primordial beings fighting among themselves for rank and place, and the order of the *odu* in the Ifá system as the outcome of their struggles for standing within the pantheon.⁷ In this way, the system of the signs, even in its seemingly static canonical arrangement, bears evidence that tension and strife are the essence of a dynamic universe.

Of course, the characterization of the original primordial beings as twins refers to the structure of the *odu* configurations themselves, composed of two identical parallel columns of four markings each, made up of either a double or a single stroke. However, twinship is a ubiquitous symbol of extraordinary spiritual power. Twinship is a mode of being replete with the fullness of the primordium and in keeping with the complete nature of the Divine. It is interesting to note, therefore, that the iconography of divination suggests a twinning or doubling of the mythic primordial inaugurators of Ifá and diviners.

Among other Yorùbá tales of the origin of divination is one that makes the primordial trickster, Eshu, the originator of Ifá: "Once the gods were hungry because men stopped sacrificing . . . Eshu arranged that knowledge should be given to men that they might know the gods' will and how to escape evil by offering sacrifice." (Pelton 1980, 136). Here Ifá is a mirror of the twin need and mutual indebtedness between gods and mortals. Iconography upholds this idea even more forcefully. Without exception, the border of every Yorùbá divining tray bears the carved image of at least one face of Eshu. At the time of a divinatory reading, the Yorùbá Ifá tray (*opon*) is always placed between the diviner and the client and oriented so that the face of Eshu is opposite the diviner, as if it were his mirror image. In this way, Eshu and the babalawo are twinned, and serve as double mediators between gods and humans.⁸

Another indicator that the system of signs is paramount in Ifá is the notable parallel with the role of the signs in other West African divination systems, and in particular that of the Dogon of Mali, known as "divination by the fox." The Dogon divinatory system involves the reading of actual paw prints left across a divining table that have been traced in sand. The table used to instruct and initiate diviners makes explicit how the signs reflect the mythology of the origin of the world and the inauguration of divination itself.⁹

According to Dogon mythology, the cosmic egg was the container of all the original elements and order; the first divining table re-presents it. Called "the belly of all the signs of the world," the cosmic egg is depicted as being divided

into four quadrants, marking the four cardinal directions and the four elements (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965, 64).

Each of these sectors . . . originally contained eight figures, each of which in turn produced eight . . . thus $8 \times 8 \times 4$, or 256 signs, to which were added 8 (two for each quadrant) which represent the mythic ancestors, and 2 for the center, representing the primordial couple, the original Nommo. This yields a total of 266 “signs of Amma” (*amma bummo*). (72)

However, as Griaule and Dieterlen note, “the 256 core signs are called the ‘complete signs of the world’ (*aduno liga bummo*)” (65). The parallels of the number of Dogon and Yorùbá divinatory signs, their divine origin, and their significance as the seminal ingredients composing the world is striking. So too is the common notion of primordial existence originating from a complete, self-contained source. Here I reiterate that according to Yorùbá cosmology too, “Olodumare, the supreme being, is said to have been the son of a Boa called Ere who hatched him, in the beginning of the world, from an enormous egg, [and this was likened to] a great water pot (*odu*)” (McClelland 1966, 423). This full and fecund container is reproduced in the complete system of the signs; significantly, the symbol of *odu Ifá* is a closed calabash.¹⁰

In Dogon mythology, the supreme being, Amma, stirred the primordial elements and from this motion, the first beings, called Nommo, were formed as four pairs of twins. Interestingly, while the original Yorùbá beings were eight pairs of twins (the sixteen principal *odu*), Ifá makes clear that the first four are significantly more powerful. For example, Ogbe Meji, the first *odu*, is said to be the son of Orunmila, founder of the earth, and Osun, the divinity who reigns over the heavens.¹¹ As the figure issuing from the binding of the twin entities of the cosmos itself, this *odu* reigns supreme. Within Ifá proceedings, these signs elicit ritual response; according to Bascom (1969a, 47), Ofun Meji, the last of the twinned figures, is so powerful in its own right that “it is tabu for a fly to alight upon it, [so] it is ‘closed’ immediately by turning over one of the shells of the divining chain when it is cast.” However, the power of the first four *odu* is such that these signs are used alone, and independent of Ifá proper or the verses associated with them, as the transformative ingredient in “*ayajo*,” protective or retaliatory “medicines.” The signs are themselves forceful and reality defining.

For the Dogon, too, the sign itself is a generative force: “the sign [is a] means of acting upon the future. The ritual execution of suggestive graphic signs is efficacious, active [*agissante*]: it promotes the existence of the thing represented, re-edits it” (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965, 79). Therefore, drawing a sign has a catalytic effect. Since the iconic image is an actual constubstantial double of that which it models, its manifestation provokes a new way of being. The ritual efficacy of divination is that it carries the germ of the symbolized being in its symbolic forms, a being who is made both visible and active in divinatory representation.

The idea present in both traditions that the very inscription of the sign generates and sanctions change substantiates my hypothesis that the signs of divination themselves bear the authorizing power of canon.

The Dogon signs are arranged on the divining table in a hierarchy, referred to as the “articulated signs of the world in descent,” an allusion to their mythic descent from heaven to earth in an ark (Griaule 1986, 84). (This is reminiscent of the *odu*'s descent to Ile-Ife). According to Dogon mythology, however, they were stolen from that realm. The myths recount that one of the primordial twins, Ogo, in an act of restless rebellion, broke away from the womb of Amma.¹² Tearing away a piece of the placenta, Ogo fashioned an ark. In it, he made several voyages between heaven and earth, vain attempts to bring into existence a rival world of his own making. The divinatory table is called “kala,” meaning “torn,” because it too was originally made from this piece of placenta.¹³ Ascending back to the womb, Ogo stole the primordial grain; descending again, he danced on the placenta and his pounding steps shaped the world. Ogo is therefore known as the “iconographer of the cosmos.”¹⁴ After each of Ogo's efforts, Amma punished him, thwarted his action and reestablished control. First Amma cut out his tongue, then broke his teeth, then slit his throat—all to deprive Ogo of the creative faculty of speech. In final punishment, Amma reduced him to the abased form of the fox (*yurugu*). But in a last effort to retain a creative role, the fox begged Amma to be allowed to speak to human beings through signs. Amma relented and made the mute fox the bearer of divination. Of course, we recognize the similarity between Ogo and Eshu, the defiant Yorùbá trickster and overseer of divination.¹⁵

On the original Dogon divinatory table, the signs relate this cosmology: the first quadrant represents the womb of God, the second shows Ogo breaking away, the third depicts the creation of heaven and earth, while the fourth quadrant contains the sign of the original placenta spread out as the first agricultural field, the microcosmic arena in which men bind the cosmic forces.¹⁶ The table is, in the words of Robert Pelton, “quite simply an *imago mundi*, an icon of the cosmos in its spatial and temporal movements, which are in turn images of the sacred history of the Dogon” (Pelton 1980, 198).

More significant for this study is that the order of signs on the Dogon divinatory table mirrors the signs in the Yorùbá system as a depiction of cosmogony. These figures represent the entire repository of knowledge about the world and the place of humans in it in iconic form. The stylized semantic fields of the *odu* themselves are the closed canon of divination. In the Dogon case, because of the completeness and sacrosanct status of the signs, “no one would invent a *bummo* nor modify the traditional arrangement. To draw a new sign would be [to create] a new thing, and therefore considered ‘to go beyond’ Amma. . . . One would say of anyone who would do such a thing: ‘He has gone beyond (lacked respect for) Amma’” (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965, 100). Similarly, in Yorùbá divination only a portion of that huge literary corpus can ever be known by any one diviner, and it

is expected that the number and form of the verses will change. One early interpreter of Ifá, J. D. Clarke, asserted that the verses connected with the *odu* figures “must not suggest an Ifá canon. No one man knows the whole tradition. I am told that babalawo ‘swap stories’ over their palm wine to demonstrate good fellowship” (1939, 246). By contrast, the iconographic signs remain constant.

The Play of the Random

To this point, I have been focusing on the divine origin of the signs to underscore their sanctity, and the fixed number of the signs to show them to be a closed set. I have shown that the signs represent the defining precedents of the cosmogony and therefore the totality of ordered existence. And we have seen how divination fixes a catalogue of the normative in concrete visual form. Divination is pivotal in West African religions precisely because it is an instantiation of the underlying cosmogonic mythologies upon which their traditions are premised. The divinatory trays and tables on which the signs are inscribed are microcosmic arenas, and the signs themselves represent “a resumé of a whole social order” (Werbner 1989, 20, quoting H. Junod). At the same time, divination situates the individual within the web of this social and cosmic order by literally tracing experience onto the “map” of prototypical cosmic events. In this way, divination turns seemingly chaotic and random occurrences into significant events. It allows individual experience to be compared, measured, analyzed, and reinterpreted against these defining patterns and precedents. In short, it allows experience to be understood.

However, divination is more than a static code. It is a dynamic process. First, despite the canonical nature of the signs, within the divinatory ritual the signs are determined by some random occurrence (for example, the remainder of palm nuts left in the hand of an Ifá diviner or the paw prints left by a fox on a Dogon divining table). This activity introduces a dynamic element into the process. Divination recasts experience not only in terms of its fixed set of signs but also through the dynamic of their reconfiguration. This is the critical juncture when the intermediating forces are at play, when Eshu opens the way to usher in a message from the orisha (divinities) and when the mute Ogo speaks through the signs of the fox. The active process of obtaining the divinatory sign itself recapitulates the cosmic dynamics that these primordial beings set in motion; neither allowed order to remain fixed, but overturned it and thus introduced new, generative possibility. In arriving at the signs by seemingly random means, divination reproduces the mythic tension between the ordained order of the cosmos and its chaotic disruption. The process reflects the ongoing interplay between the ideal model of reality and the fraught reality of day-to-day experience—the kind that brings one to confer with a diviner in the first place.

The geomantic forms of West African divination systems (whether etched in wood dust on a Yorùbá divining tray or traced on the sand of a Dogon divinatory

table) literally re-recast the idiosyncratic situation of a client into the more interpretable idioms of culture. But interpretation of the signs is not rigidly scripted, even by the verses of Ifá. Rather, the recombining arrangements of the system's symbolic repertoire are key, even for understanding the often cryptic references of the *odu* verses. As the signs are reconfigured on the tray or table, juxtaposed images obtain new, enriched meaning.¹⁷ The visual ideograms not only afford the participants the opportunity to “see” what is at play, but also to play with it, as interpretation is imaginatively applied. The visual metaphors of divination evoke a re-vision of experience.

In Dogon divination, the principle of interpretation consists in observing how the paw prints of the fox “meet or avoid the various shapes on the chart,” the divinatory table (Calame-Griaule 1965, 524). The tracks constitute the moving parts of the Dogon divinatory system, which introduce the aleatory. Diviners decipher the trajectory of the fox tracks because their direction and rotation within a given segment of the table and their proximity to the signs inscribed on it indicate the meaning. For example, if the fox's prints circle an emblem indicating the inquiry is about an animal to be purchased, and then lead to a sector of the table containing the sign of the funerary blanket, this indicates the animal will die. Here we see how meaning is embedded not only in the fixed forms (canonical signs) alone, but emerges with the changing configurations that result from the aleatory. Situational complexity is embodied in the moving parts of the divinatory canon—in this case, the fox's prints.

In Ifá, the *babalawo* beats the palm nuts to introduce the element of the random. According to the number of palm nuts that remain in his hand at each turn, he draws the series of marks to shape the *odu* that will speak to the particular situation of the inquirer. Therefore the Ifá signs themselves are the “moving part” of the process. Moreover, the resulting double configuration (two columns of four markings) represents a struggle between principal figures, and the *odu* is interpreted in terms of this depiction. In this way dynamism is inherent in the sign itself.

As the *babalawo* traces the figure of the *odu* sign in wood dust on the divining tray, he uses a back-and-forth motion. Rather than constructing the octogram by configuring one side of the double figure and then the other, he determines both simultaneously, drawing the parallel figures from right to left and top to bottom. This pattern is reminiscent of the way the original twinned *odu* “paired off” until they had made an entire circuit of royal visits. In that primordial perambulation, half of one of the original twinned signs met half of another to form a new coupling, until arriving “home” to the twin.¹⁸

A Dogon diviner reads the six segments of the oblong divinatory table in a similar trajectory, first from left to right, then top to bottom and then back again, from right to left. This pattern is reminiscent of Ogo's zigzagging series of ascents

and descents and his circumambulation on earth in search of his twin. In both cases, I suggest the pattern of the divinatory action reiterates the back-and-forth journeys of the primordial beings at the beginning of time, even as it reflects the ongoing dynamism of this world for which they established all precedents. This dynamism is what leads me to see not just another cultural icon but a living document in divination, a visual discourse—about the universe, culture, and the nature of experience.

Once cast in terms of the visual canon, the client's experience can be revised—both in the literal sense of “being seen anew” and in the figurative sense of enabling them to be transformed. However, the interpretation of the visual metaphors created by these recombining patterns and juxtapositions is not prescribed by the diviner nor by any oral literature associated with a given pattern. Nor is interpretation made in strict conformity with a fixed code; rather, the divinatory process relies on a hermeneutical exegesis in which the client takes part as much as the diviner.

Puzzling out the significance of the new recombined patterns that unfold during the course of divinatory consultation draws participants into a deeper level of engagement with the visual canon. The genius of the divinatory enterprise is this ludic quality that promotes a deeply edifying imaginative interplay with the visual canon. The interpretation of the signs invites a kind of visionary theorizing on the meaning of the canon, and demonstrates what Jonathan Z. Smith calls a “canonical-interpretive enterprise” (1982, 50), which I will suggest is a form of serious play.

Doors and Games:

The Play of the Canon and the Creative Elaboration of Culture

In this concluding section, I demonstrate that divination's visual canon extends into the material forms surrounding its practice and into culture at large. Continuing my comparative study of Dogon and Yorùbá iconography, I will illustrate this innovative use of divination's lexicon.

Doors

Both Yorùbá and Dogon have a tradition of sculpting doors in low relief. For the Yorùbá, such decorated doors “signal places frequented by persons of some distinction—rulers, elders, and priests—or spiritual forces—gods and ancestors. They publicize as well as restrict entrances to special spaces” (H. Drewal 1980, 25).

Griaule and Dieterlen (1965, 85) described a sculpted door of a Dogon Hogon, the religious and temporal leader of a clan, and its iconography. It shows the 266 primordial elements referred to in the cosmogonic mythology arranged in multiple columns of short lines, an image that calls to mind the 256 Yorùbá *odu*; these geometric patterns or “signs” also appear on Dogon shrine walls. They refer

to “the basic ontological properties of the world” (Pemberton 1987, 8). On the opposite panel of this door is sculpted a broken spiral moving from a central point out towards the periphery and turning back in on itself. It reportedly represents the mixing of the primordial elements, an activity that brought the world into existence, and is called “a day’s work of Amma” (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965, 84).

A sculpted door of a Yorùbá diviner presented by art historian Hans Witte (1984, 33, plate 2) reiterates many of the same visual themes traditionally seen on Yorùbá divining trays. In its center is a divining tray with the face of Eshu on right and left. Whenever “Ifá trays are represented on sculptured doors, the head of Eshu is always on the right side, so that when the door stands open, Eshu indicates the way” (ibid. 33). Four *opele* chains are arranged around the Ifá tray.¹⁹ Their cowries are positioned to form the signatures of the four principal *odu*. Together their sequence signifies “the most terrible spell of all” (ibid. 24).

Bascom refers to such a configuration as well, stating that it represents “pure *ayajo*,” or medicine associated with the Ifá figures, consisting of instructions for herbs and incantations:

The figures of Ogbe Meji, Oyeku Meji, Iwori Meji, and Edi Meji set at right angles to each other as reported by Frobenius (1913, I, 255), Maupoil (1943, 187–188), and Mercier (1954, 255) was recognized by informants as part of Ifá, but only as medicine and without any orientation to the cardinal points of the compass. An Ife diviner . . . identified it as “mediator” (*oniata*), a very strong medicine to spoil the work of one’s enemy. (Bascom 1969a, 61)

The appearance of this configuration on a diviner’s door shows the signs themselves to be emblems of communication and bearers of power in their own right.

Above this configuration on the door is a round wheel-like image: two concentric circles with the space between them divided into four segments. It depicts the compartments of an open Ifá container used to store divining materials.²⁰ The form of this container is, incidentally, not unlike the description of the original Dogon divining table, which was also round. It, too, contained all the elemental signs of the world.

On either side of the container is a tortoise, a commonly reiterated symbol of Ifá (Orunmila or Eshu). Its propensity to retreat into the protective camouflage of its shell metaphorically represents the closely guarded “secret” knowledge of Ifá. This is the case for the Dogon, who also see in the tortoise shell an inscription of the primal field and the divinatory table.

The undulating messenger-snake also embellishes either side of the door, as two sinuous columns. Because tortoises, like snakes, bind water and land, they are also considered messengers between realms, just as Ifá is a messenger between realms. Also depicted is the elongated flute of Eshu, a well-known icon of this trickster’s status as messenger of the gods.²¹ At either end of the door are

wide bands of the complex interlaced pattern, *ibo*, the ubiquitous symbol of the interwoven aspects of existence.

On one end of this figure is an extension, a sort of handle, in the shape of the classic Yorùbá icon of the double-headed ax of Shango, the Oyo God of Thunder, who is described in the divinatory poetry as “the great avenger.” It is said that “Shango fights with troublemakers and those who use bad medicine to harm others, as well as with his worshipers who offend him in other ways” (Bascom 1969b, 84). The evocation of a punishing avenger reiterates the message of the *opele* configuration (“the most terrible spell of all”), for certainly there is no force more threatening than an avenging spirit.

The Game of Ayo

Most interesting of all is a figure in the lower quadrants of the door, not commented on by Witte, which seems obviously to be the board of a popular game known by many names but which the Yorùbá call *Ayo*. However, what is to be made of the *Ayo* gameboard itself? *Ayo* is a game played throughout Africa, with versions of it found as far to the south and east as Madagascar and as far to the north and west as Mauritania. It is popular throughout sub-Saharan West Africa, where it might be played for idle amusement during siesta, or turn into a serious tournament between fierce competitors surrounded by spectators admiring the players’ skill.

The game is based on the random distribution of seeds (like random patterns of the diviner’s palm nuts) and requires attention to the constant reconfiguration of their arrangements as they are played. A player must devise a strategy of action on the basis of emerging patterns, a process much like the search for guidance within the context of divination. Before extending the analogy much further, let us turn our attention to the structure of *Ayo*, its concrete form and its rule of operation.

The wooden game board is an elongated form into which are carved twelve cups, six on each side. At the start of the game, each of these cups holds four game pieces, usually large seeds resembling palm nuts. One proceeds by distributing the seeds from a cup on one’s own side of the game board, always moving the seeds from left to right. When it is a player’s turn he or she scoops up a cup of seeds and distributes them, dropping them one at a time into successive cups, always proceeding in the same circulating direction. The gesture of scooping up the playing pieces and casting them around the board is not unlike that of the diviner, who in “beating the palm nuts” attempts to grasp them all with one swipe of the hand but expects and allows one or two to fall or remain behind. The object is to land in a cup on the opponent’s side containing only one or two seeds, so that the drop of the final seed makes a new total of two or three seeds.²² These are the winning combinations that allow the player to “capture” those seeds (as one would capture pieces after jumping them in a game of checkers). An alternative

way of playing is to make the winning combination either a three or a four.²³ At the end of the game, when all the pieces have been won, the player who has the greatest number of pieces wins the game.

Ayo is often said to be a game of chance, but is in fact one of skill. A player must calculate and devise a strategy of action on the basis of the emerging patterns on the board, a process much like the search for insight and guidance on the basis of the emerging signs in divination. In a fast game between competing players, it also requires psychological cunning. I suggest that these are the same skills required to work out one's destiny, for destiny is considered more a matter of careful deliberation and bold action than a fixed fate.

A game is the engagement of a complex interplay between rules and chance. In this way, too, Ayo is not unlike divination, which explores the tension between the ideal order and real experience. To play is to intervene in the sequence of events, in order to transform a situation. This is also what divination does.

The manipulation of the palm nuts on a divining tray follows strict rules, but the interpretive processes promotes the application of skills and involves the active engagement of its participants—not only the diviner but also the inquirer, whose concerns it graphically depicts. The aim of the divinatory engagement is not to predict a fixed fate but to enable the individual to perceive options and maximize possibilities. In this way, the game of Ayo and the practice of divination follow a parallel course.

Ayo in Ifá Divination and Yorùbá Ritual

In her documentation of Yorùbá ritual, Margaret Drewal (1992) elaborates upon a series of rituals called *Itefa*, the “Establishment of the Self,” which are explicitly concerned with fixing the identity of an individual within the community. Divination plays a critical part in *Itefa*; the babalawo performs divination to determine the Ifá texts that will function “as models for self-examination and self-interpretation [that will enable the individual to] embark on a lifelong program of searching, reflexivity and interpretation” (63). *Itefa* also prepares a personal set of palm nuts consecrated for the sole use of an initiate throughout his or her lifetime.

Drewal recounts that during her observations of *Itefa* ceremonies held for the sons of Oshitola, a diviner and Drewal's principal informant, the *odu* verse obtained for one of the children referred to a culture hero who played Ayo. This ancestor-hero made conscious use of the game to draw people to him, gain from their knowledge, and learn how to rule. While the reference to Ayo in the *odu* corpus itself is not particularly telling, for there are many references to banal activities in the verses, what is significant is that the verse recognizes that Ayo is an exercise of strategy, requiring social grace, cunning, careful observation, and calculated action. From its practice, the hero learns to be king. The game is a metaphor for all that is necessary to succeed in life. Oshitola interpreted the *odu*

as indicating that “the gathering and exchanging of views will be beneficial to Olofin,” his son (M. Drewal 1992, 84). Accordingly, an improvised ritual segment was devised in light of the reading, and the children were made to play a perfunctory game of Ayo. From this example of a game embedded in a ritual, we see the interwoven nature of visual and verbal “text.” The improvised game becomes part of a ritual act that will engender the qualities associated with its practice in the initiate. The enactment of game playing in this ritual context is itself an imaginative play of the cultural canon.

Ayo and the Ark

The speculation that there is a conscious correlation between divination and Ayo is also borne out by the association that the Dogon make between the game board and the “ark” of Ogo. According to various mythic accounts, the Dogon trickster journeyed to and from heaven in this ark to gather the primordial grain. The ark is represented as a small square box, “*yurugu koro sibe nay*, ‘ark of the *yurugu* with four corners’” (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965, 204). A drawing of Ogo’s ark that appears in Germaine Dieterlen and Marcel Griaule’s *Le renard pâle* (1986) exhibits a clear physical correlation with the game board: both are elongated three-dimensional wooden blocks in which are carved two parallel rows of cups.

The nuts or seeds used to play Ayo suggest the palm nuts that fell from Olo-dumare’s primordial tree, and also primeval grains Ogo stole from heaven and bore away in the ark. Their displacement on the game board would correspond to the movement of the first spiral stirrings of creation within the cosmic egg, as well as the ongoing fecund permutations of the cosmos. During the game, the Dogon orient the board from east to west, the direction in which the ark supposedly progressed when it first came to earth. (This is also the direction associated with Eshu). The game board’s allusion to greater cosmic dynamics was suggested by its association with the Dogon calendrical system, in which each of the holes stood for a month. The whole of the game reproduces the workings of the universe in time and space. It also represents the fecund activity of the dynamic cosmos in which the human being holds a central place: one half of the board represents women, the other side men, while the distribution of grains connotes the union of the sexes and the proliferation of the human species. This may lend further insight into the significance of the fact that half the *odu* configuration is considered the male side and the other half female. We see that like the diviner’s tray or table, the game is nothing less than a microcosm of the world and that the seeds moving on it, like the changing configurations of the signs, represent its dynamic action.

The Play of the Visual Canon

Extending the metaphor between the game and the process of divination, I contend that divination demonstrates a concern for both the rules that govern its

operation and inventive engagement that makes the process rewarding. The signs constitute the normative order, but they are constantly put into play.

Through the recombining arrangements of its symbolic repertoire, divination literally recasts experience. The interpretation of the signs allows for an imaginative interplay with that canon. In this way, divination orchestrates a full immersion in a compelling interactive experience in which meaning is constructed in the playful engagement of its lexicon. Divination offers more than rigid prescription or mute enactment; it is a playful transaction, a strategy for negotiating meaning. It is this ludic quality that makes divination both a powerful vehicle for personal transformation and an effective medium for conveying the significance of the canon. Divination is serious play—the play of the visual canon.

Notes

1. I developed this argument on divination as West African epistemology elsewhere, notably in my dissertation (Grillo 1995) and in Grillo (2006).

2. There are many accounts of the origin, nature and function of the *odu*. Among those cited by McClelland (1966) are Johnson (1921), Bascom (1942), Lucas (1948), and Parrinder (1961). McClelland warns “It is by no means easy to arrive at a clear conception from the complex and mystifying stories that overwhelm the inquirer” (1966, 423).

3. Like Ogo, the first to emerge from the “primordial egg,” also known as the “womb” of Amma, in Dogon mythology.

4. The Fon of Benin who adopted the Yorùbá system of Ifá divination also trace its origins to the city of Ife. This city, while an actual administrative center of a southern Nigerian province, about fifty miles east of Ibadan, evokes a “mystical homeland” where “the supreme creator God passed” (Maupoil 1981, 32). Maupoil cites A. B. Ellis (1894, 89) saying “Ife is considered the cradle of the human race” (1981, 32).

5. Mircea Eliade would have seen the archetype of the *axis mundi* in this tree. Maupoil relates the Fon legend surrounding this tree, named *Fe-de* (palm nut tree of Fe), showing it to follow the celestial movement: “And since its creation one can see it standing straight up in the morning, inclined toward the middle during the day, and touching the earth with its branches . . . at nightfall. It rises again the next day, and its movement continues in this way to the present day” (1981, 36).

6. Bascom established that the names of the sixteen basic figures are standard, but that the order varies within Yorùbá country, as well as in practices of Ifá in Dahomey, Togo, Ghana, Cuba, and Brazil. Though twenty-one rankings were recorded, Bascom (1969a, 47) noted that one order predominates.

7. The whole arrangement of the 256 *odu* as a system emphasizes the primacy of order for interpretation. In “Two Studies of Ifá Divination” (Morton-Williams 1966), this issue is discussed from two different points of view. Bascom (1966) presents an empirical survey of the order as recorded by informants not only among the Yorùbá but elsewhere in West Africa and among the practitioners of Ifá in Cuba to assess the reliability of anthropological descriptions. Bascom ascertains a remarkable consistency of the structure across traditions that attests to the important symbolic significance of the order itself. E. M. McClelland’s associated piece (1966) confirms the uniformity of structure and explains its consistent internal logic as a pairing off of twin elements.

8. In both Dogon and Yorùbá divination the diviner is a twin of the primordial trickster, inextricably associated with the technique. Dogon mythology suggests that we are the twins of Ogo, restless to find completion, to make a world of our own meaning, unwilling merely to submit to our fate, always looking to negotiate our destiny—beginning with a trip to the diviner to peek into the path set before us in the hopes of taking another, shorter, better route to our own ends. Diviners and clients alike are twins of Ogo, *cocreators of this world*, pushing against what is stirring things up, making new things happen in the imaginative interplay with the world.

9. Michel-Jones suggests that the myth and common Dogon oral literature such as fables and stories should not be categorically differentiated. Moreover, she indicates that she would not distinguish between the esoteric and exoteric variations of the myth, since the versions are not incompatible for the individuals for whom they have significance. “If the myth is ‘living,’ that is to say efficacious, if it possesses an integrating character as a conceptual framework and interpretive grid of the whole sensible world, as the ‘word of old’ in which all the elements of social life are theoretically prefigured, it is susceptible to various ‘transcriptions’” (1978, 37).

10. The iconography of broken pottery that decorates the altars erected to Eshu is in striking contrast to the closed calabash, the symbol of Odu Ifá. Whereas Ifá is the closed system of order and the calabash the container of the contents of destiny, the broken pottery indicates the force of Eshu to break open and upset this contained order. Whereas the Odu represent structure, Eshu willfully injects the energy of “antistructure” and the uncontainable. The Ifá tray circumscribes this energy, and shows that the very order of the cosmos that it represents holds a place for the unpredictable and the means to negotiate destiny. In Dogon divination, the table serves this purpose.

11. These figures are like a primordial couple. In striking parallel to the Dogon myth, they would have made an incestuous couple. In the Dogon myth, however, the son issuing from such a union is the trickster Ogo.

12. In breaking away from his twin, Ogo is an exceptional being, a loner who is forever after in search of his twin. In the mythology associated with Ifá, too, there is reference to a primordial being who is exceptional in that he was not a twin, *Osetua*. *Osetua* is said to be the son of Eshu, the primordial trickster, and Osun, who as a witch is by definition a transformer associated with reversals of order. With such a parentage, *Osetua* necessarily embodies a provocative force: “The son of such parents inspired dread and could not be wholly disregarded. He . . . acted as a special courier from earth to Ifá in heaven” (McClelland 1966, 424).

13. “*Kala sibe nay*” (“torn at the four corners”) (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965, 274).

14. In this way, Ogo is like Eshu, known for his vigorous energy, insatiable libido, and agility. Eshu’s notorious dancing similarly shapes the world. One of his praise songs says, “if there are no drums / he will dance to the pounding of mortars” (Pelton 1980, 132, quoting Wescott 1962, 352).

15. Eshu is the mediator between the divinities and human beings, the principal messenger of Ifá and the figure around whom divination pivots. As a trickster, he stirs up the unpredictable, interjects the unexpected, and thereby opens the way to an unknown destiny, replete with possibility. Eshu represents reversals and transformation, the very object of the divinatory enterprise.

16. According to Griaule and Dieterlen (1965, 86), before planting an “ancestral field,” a schematic representation of the 266 primordial signs is inscribed on the ground. This image, called the *vagea minne*, is comprised of two concentric circles and a central point. Between the two circles are four or five jagged lines, a dynamic image of vibrant motion. Outside this circle, the four cardinal points of the cosmos are marked with grains. In this way the ancestral field is correlated with the arrangement of the primordial egg and its elements. The image suggests the dynamic and generative forces.

17. As the fixed templates of order, the tray or table represent the boundaries within which the chaos of the random is safely entertained. These palimpsests serve as the container of the unleashed disorder.

18. “[The signs] are set under the names of two Odu in each case. . . . Conceiving [the basic sixteen Odu figures] first as personages and referring to the supporting myth [their structure can be seen as] *a stately choreographic movement of which the basic features are a constant pairing off*, a regular change in partners, and a fixed path to tread until the measure, having worked itself out, comes to a natural end” (McClelland 1966, 425, emphasis mine).

19. The Ifá *opele* is a divining instrument that offers an alternative to the use of the palm nuts, and conveys the *odu* more rapidly. It consists of a double chain on which are strung four elements such as cowrie shells or pieces of calabash each. The chain is held at one end and thrust away from the diviner. The pieces land in either a concave/convex position corresponding to a single or double mark of the *odu*. Yorùbá myths point to the chain as a vehicle for the original descent of Oduduwa to earth. It is therefore the corollary of the ark in which Ogo descends from the primordial egg to create the earth, according to Dogon mythology.

20. Also said to contain substances representing the four primordial elements. This is similar to the Dogon *vagea minne* (see note 16).

21. The association of the world-creating trickster and the flute reinforces the idea that sound breaks the homogeneity of silence, marks time with its rhythm, and is a powerful generative force.

22. Here we see that a winning move in Ayo is like the determinative action of the beating of the palm nuts in Ifá divination: when one or two palm nuts remain in his hand, the babalawo inscribes one of the marks that comprises the *odu* sign.

23. The numbers three and four have symbolic significance in Dogon cosmology as well as Ifá iconography, representing male and female principles respectively. Bascom (1969a, 27) notes that palm nuts with three “eyes,” indentations at their bases, are considered male; only those those with four “eyes,” considered female, are appropriate for ritual use. These are called *awenren Ifá*.

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