

## Total Impact: Being Changed by Divination in West Africa

*Religion: Super Religion*

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Full Text:

Page 205

## Total Impact: Being Changed by Divination in West Africa

Full Text:

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*“One does not live with impunity in intimacy with ‘foreign’ religious forms, which are sometimes extravagant and often terrible.”*

—Eliade, *The Quest*, 62.

The very nature of fieldwork, the anthropological investigation of culture by direct observation, constructs the conditions for “exceptional experience.” Learning to inhabit an unfamiliar world and operate outside one’s normal frame of reference guarantees that the “participant-observer” will inevitably be changed. As Victor W. Turner (1920–1983) once observed, anthropologists “render themselves vulnerable to the total impact ... of the intricate human existences of those they are ‘hired’ to ‘study’” ( 1985, 205 ). This may be especially true when the effort to bridge perspectives involves “a mode of experimentation” ( Jackson 1989 ) that not only engages the researcher in intense and intimate inquiry, but also entangles her as an inextricable part of it. For me, the experiential and experimental investigation of the cryptic practice of divination in West Africa was such an entanglement. Divination is the practice of interpreting signs, such as the random cast of objects, to foretell the future or reveal hidden knowledge, and in Africa it is pivotal to indigenous religions.

It was the summer of 1997 and I had just begun my postdoctoral fieldwork on traditional divination in Côte d'Ivoire, a country where I had lived years before with my then husband who was a native of that country. It was a burdened pilgrimage. By the time I made that trip back, I'd been divorced for three years. I had been ambivalent about returning, unsure of how my ex-in-laws would receive me and reluctant to revisit the familiar places of my past. But Abidjan, the country's economic capital, was the perfect place for my investigation. It is an ethnically heterogeneous city, bustling with immigrants and refugees—a place where, even amidst skyscrapers and traffic jams, divination in many varied forms still flourished. I'd planned my itinerary by giving myself a week to settle in and see the family before setting off to attend a conference in Dakar organized by one of the scholarly organizations that had funded my trip. To my relief, the family did embrace me anew, lovingly assuring me that I was still their sister and daughter. Moreover, they promised to help me find diviners. Happily reassured, I left for Senegal.

*Page 206 |*

## **THE FIRST THROW OF THE COWRIES**

In Dakar I befriended Fatou Samb, a slender young woman with long braided extensions and a sweet demeanor. As one of the student guides attending to conference participants, she agreed to accompany me to the market. While we strolled between stalls I told her about my research project. “I know someone you have to meet, but we'll have to hurry if we want to find her home.” She pulled me by the elbow toward a taxi. “She divines by throwing cowrie shells [sea snails] and reading their patterns,” she said. “I promise you, she won't disappoint you.”

Fatou called out greetings in Wolof as we entered the little gated villa. The cowrie-thrower, Aissatou N'Diaye, shyly lowered her lids and touched her hand to her heart. There was a brief exchange between them. The pleasant-faced woman gave a gentle nod. “She says it's not her profession to throw the cowries,” Fatou advised. “She consults from time to time inside her own house, but she doesn't do it for everyone. She'll do it for you only because she's my ‘auntie.’ She considers me as her own child.” With no more preliminaries, Aissatou N'Diaye cleared the coffee table and scattered a handful of little white cowrie shells. Fatou translated.

You used to have a relationship with a short man; he was black. An African. You two were married, but it didn't work out. A woman came and broke you up. You knew her. There is someone else who came along, he is tall, he is white. He is twenty years older than you. He will be a better husband. You will have a beautiful marriage with that man.

Without looking up she tossed the shells again. “The man who is coming to you, he is fair skinned. He is big, strong. He is not a small man, he is not a beautiful man, but he is good. He speaks of marriage, but he lives far away. It will be a beautiful marriage.” She flicked her wrist and the cowries scattered again. “If you go to work in another part of the country, you will get what you want. In that place where you will have a new job—there will be many women there; it will be close to the ocean.” There was another throw. “Do you see that? They all landed with their jagged openings lying face down. They've finished speaking.” The consultation was concluded.

## THROWN BY COWRIES

How could Aissatou have known that I was divorced (as a woman traveling alone I decided to wear a band on my left ring finger), that my ex-husband was African and shorter than I, or that our marriage had ended over a woman I had introduced him to? How could she have seen my fiancé, not twenty but sixteen years older, and tall, solidly built, fair (though balding)? She was right, too, that he lived far away. He was Swiss and lived in Geneva; our engagement was going to be a long one while we figured out logistics. I was looking for a job. I didn't yet know that her prognostication about where I would land was right: a school on the Pacific coast with a predominantly female student body. I didn't know either just how beautiful my new marriage would still be now, almost twenty years later.

I asked if I could take pictures. Aissatou adjusted herself on the couch and prepared her features for a solemn portrait. I snapped a few shots and then aimed the camera at the last arrangement of cowries on the coffee table. I pressed the button. Nothing happened. I tried

*Page 207 |*

again, but there was no click, no flash, no whir of advancing film. Another attempt failed. "Maybe I should ask permission first." Only half-joking, I said, "Cowries, you've been good to me. I came here unannounced and you received me, you spoke to me. Please indulge me once more and allow me to take this photo." Click. It worked. Aissatou clapped her hands, Fatou threw herself back into the armchair, and we all laughed in merry wonderment. And it threw me.

## THE UNCANNY AS A DEFINING FEATURE OF SUPERNATURAL RELIGION

This was just the beginning of a remarkable string of encounters with diviners of all kinds in Côte d'Ivoire: those who write in sand, readers of mouse tracks, handclaspers, mirror gazers, lanyard throwers, interpreters of bone. But with each encounter I became more conflicted. The diviners refused to be interviewed without first demonstrating their techniques and their power. So, time and again reclusive practitioners, hidden away in humble quarters, receiving clients in laundry-lined inner courtyards or stifling rented rooms, nimbly relayed intimate details about my life with uncanny accuracy. They repeatedly referred to my ex-husband and the unfinished issues between us. With every consultation I became more and more the subject of my research and my personal story its object. What I thought would be a research expedition that would launch my academic career turned into an intense inquiry into my haunting personal past.

The inexplicability of the diviners' access to private knowledge was the first dimension of the uncanny with which I was repeatedly confronted. The remarkable precision of their diagnoses never failed to elicit "blank wonder [and] astonishment," the kind "that strikes us dumb" (Otto 1958, 41, 134). Here "the uncanny" refers to a heightened awe in the face of a phenomenon that defies conventional explanatory paradigms of reality, and the lingering bewilderment that results.

There is, however, another critical dimension of "the uncanny," one that can't be attributed to a

cognitive conundrum alone. For Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), the uncanny is also experienced as a particular feeling of dread that “penetrates to the very marrow, making hair bristle and ... limbs quake” (16). This sensation is distinct from fear, which may be justified by a real threat. The particular kind of distress that arises is apprehension, in both senses of the word: a trembling trepidation as well as a grasp, perception, or awareness of something to that point unknown. Otto considered such agitated foreboding a fundamental feature of the original religious impulse. He famously associated that frightening but fascinating sense of mystery (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*) with revelation of “the holy,” that is to say, the awesome power of God.

According to Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who regarded religious belief as delusion rather than as the ground of being (as did Otto), what holds sway in these cases may simply be the mistaken ascription of agency to “psychical reality” (like fantasy, daydreams, or hallucinations), a characteristic inclination of the infantile, primitive, or neurotic mind. Yet Freud conceded that even when these supposed stages and states have been “surmounted,” the phenomenon of the uncanny is not wholly overcome. Freud also described this unique sensibility as intense and intimate. But for him this was because “the uncanny” is constituted by a (symbolic or unconscious) reversal of all that is intimate in the sense of being familiar, hospitable, and

Page 208 |

belonging to home. Whatever is deemed “uncanny” is not only alien and menacing, it is inflected with gloom, a sense of the ghastly and is described as eerie (Freud, [1919] 2003). The prime example is the haunted house: the supposedly safe place containing the intimacy of home becomes the site of mysterious horror, full of fascinating dread.

Either way—as holy or as terrifyingly unhomey—this unique sensibility combines with a dawning appreciation that reality may entail matters beyond either ken or control. It comes as a fleeting sense that beyond the realm of known and natural reality is “the supernatural.” It is this second feature of the uncanny that made its total impact on me during my further investigation into divination and the strange and ambiguous powers of its practitioners. One dark night following a consultation with a notorious geomancer (a diviner who interprets markings on the ground or sand) also reputed to be a great “witch,” I suffered a ghastly ordeal that presented what I felt was an intense, intimate, and unwelcome glimpse into occult dimensions of reality.

Before I can relate this extraordinary experience or attempt to account for it, though, more needs to be said about such phenomena.

## SIGNIFICANT MARKERS

Experiences deemed extraordinary by Western ethnographers (and others schooled in comparative cultural study) may not be considered to be so by those they are studying. Certain kinds of experiences, though not exactly commonplace, are cultural touchstones.

Particular—and particularly disturbing—episodes are held up as significant markers that the “supernatural” is not only real, but that the encounter marks the one who experiences this dimension and alters her destiny. For example, in West Africa, genies (a word that comes from the Arabic “djinn”) come in dreams to lay claim to human beings, to “marry” them and serve as their spiritual protectors and guides, or they may initiate people to their vocation as diviners, teaching them to interpret the cowries or to ascertain which herbs to use in “medicines”

(including spiritual charms). These peculiarly vivid episodes follow stereotypical patterns, and their very predictability is deemed to confirm their authenticity. Regularly recounted in daily conversations around shared plates of food or in open-air kiosks over a beer, or while chatting on a veranda at dusk, anecdotes are more than cultural folklore; the recurring details become inextricably woven into the popular social imaginary. The constant allusion to extraordinary beings (such as genies, witches, and ghosts) and to their regular, life-altering intrusions into the human world (both public and private) makes the “supernatural” an integral feature of a culture's epistemology—its way of knowing and experiencing reality itself. But, interestingly enough, it is not unusual that the extraordinary experiences of anthropologists correlate exactly with the idioms of local symbolism and cultural expectation.

“An interesting aspect of extraordinary experiences [by Western scholars] is that they often take a form and content consistent with one's host culture—even if the anthropologist is relatively new to that society” ( Young and Goulet 1994, 7 ). Whether this can be held up as evidence of the existence of an actual alternate reality or whether it only attests to the impressionable nature of the visiting scholar will always be at issue. What is more interesting to my mind is the fact that “anthropologists who have such experiences are usually changed by them.

*Page 209 |*

## **BEING THERE AND BEING CHANGED**

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) forcefully argued that the task of the scholar is to bridge the divide between “us” and “them” through empathetic interpretation, but this does not require any kind of special attunement or involve mystical participation. Rather, it's a matter of “seeing their [outward, observable] experiences within the framework of their own idea[s]” ( 1983, 59 ). Ethnography is not about “get[ting] yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants.... The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to” ( 1983, 58 ). In Geertz's view, cultural immersion and mastery of the system of symbols and meaning should provide the ethnographer with the kind of insight that is more akin to getting a joke than it is like “achieving communion” ( 1983, 70 ).

The cultivation of cultural adjustment to vernacular custom and expression is necessary “if we expect people to tolerate our intrusions” ( 1983, 70 ). Sometimes, though, it happens that the outsider gets caught up involuntarily in an extraordinary experience—one that seems to suggest that the neat boundaries of “outsider” and “insider” can and do collapse and collide. Sometimes it seems that the only way to make sense of that experience is through recourse to the modes of thought of the “other.” In these cases, one may feel less the intruder than the hapless victim of disorienting intrusion oneself. At these times we end up asking ourselves, “what the devil was I up to anyway?” Or at least I did as I got caught up in the practices of divination and sacrifice.

Diviners are not only prognosticators of the future, but diagnosticians and healers. With their special insight they supposedly identify the spiritual sources of social and physical ills and use their reputed powers to offer remedies to fight the malevolent forces that plague their clients. In most cases, the principal goal of the consultation is to determine what sacrifice will alleviate the client's suffering. Therefore, every consultation ends with a prescription for sacrifice to

clear the path of obstacles, to avert danger, or to ward off witches' spells. The sacrifice is usually small and a symbolic token rather than a blood sacrifice: a few kola nuts or a coin left at the crossroad, for example.

Once I decided to become as much a participant as an observer—or rather, once the position was imposed upon me by the diviners' insistence that I consult with them—I felt that integrity demanded that I follow through with the experiments and perform the indicated rites. I soon got swept up into a seemingly endless cycle of consultation and sacrifice. I bathed in herbs and a silver ring; I gave alms to beggars; I distributed coins to babies still being carried on their mothers' backs; I prayed over a goat, watched as its throat was slit, its body cut up on its flayed skin, and distributed the packets of meat. As I did so, I slipped more deeply into the worldview I was supposedly studying. I began to lose the emotional and psychic distance I thought necessary for academic pursuit. I tried not to lose my bearings or sense of control. I told myself the experiential engagement was a necessary part of the investigation, but I struggled with feeling myself to be a voyeur, a sham researcher “gone native.”

Straddling a position between the dispassionate, analytical outsider to a foreign culture and the earnest, unselfconscious insider is not unsuitable for an anthropologist or other fieldworker. In fact, it is necessary. The participant-observer inhabits the world of the other by engaging in daily realities and authentic relationships. The object is to develop the cultural competence necessary for one to understand not only the external structures and systems of that world, but also its habitus—the values, dispositions, and other internalized and invisible cultural constructs that more subtly determine how people behave ( Bourdieu [1977] 2013 ). If the task

*Page 210 |*

is to describe how beliefs appear real to the cultural insider or how their practices define them, fieldwork requires being ready to experience the world differently as well as a willingness to experience a different way of being in the world. In other words, being there is not just a matter of geographic displacement; it also implies encounter and an exchange. That kind of “being there” may also involve being changed.

Voluntarily shifting one's frame of reference and temporarily suspending disbelief in the explanations supplied by informants is part of the attempt to understand the native point of view. Immersion and the cultivation of a degree of cultural fluency that it entails are expected of a social interpreter. To local actors, that demonstration of social competence is the basis for mutual regard, deeper trust, and more significant communication upon which more authentic understanding and viable interpretation depends. Taking the other seriously is a minimum requirement for being taken seriously as a cultural researcher.

Taking the other seriously, however, does not mean naively adopting or espousing the worldview of the other. “Going native” is disparaged not only as evidence of bad work but also of bad faith. According to Geertz, “whatever sense is made of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expression not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness” ( 1986, 373 ).

But what of their intrusion into our consciousness? What happens to understanding when intuition or empathy asserts itself so forcefully that the views of the other suddenly seem the only way to make sense of sensational experience?

## TALK OF WITCHES

More often than not, when I would discuss my fieldwork with Ivoirian friends and family, I'd encounter a cold resistance, especially from Christians who disparaged traditional practices such as divination as idolatrous fetishism—the extravagant irrational devotion to something believed to have magical power. With that one loaded term, they demonized the appeal to these ritual specialists as something antithetical to “religion” and disavowed the efficacy of divinatory consultation. My (ex) sister-in-law, “Hélène,” a good Methodist, wrinkled her nose and gave me strong warning that I didn't know what I was getting mixed up in. “Those consultants are no different from witches. They are not always good. Some of them will look into your soul and take what they want. They can steal your star.” She related stories of a woman she knew whose luck in business turned bad after she consulted with a renowned practitioner. Even those more sympathetic to the traditions and who confessed to conferring with diviners themselves conceded that while practitioners interceded for the well-being of the client, they were not beyond applying their purported powers to destructive ends. Their power is neither good nor evil; it is a neutral force, like nature. Fire can cook your food or burn your house down. It all depends on one's intent and the extent of one's mastery or degree of control.

Witchcraft is well recognized as a construct that still has currency in the contemporary social imaginary in West Africa. In daily conversation, recourse is regularly made to witches as the source of evil and inexplicable suffering. Common lore depicts witches as malevolent human beings with the ability to intervene in human affairs by invisible spiritual means, taking pleasure in inflicting misery and misfortune, causing incurable illness, continual failure, ruin, and death. As in Western portraits of witches, they are said to belong to covens, to operate nocturnally and in secret. They are called “soul-eaters” because they supposedly feast together on their victim in the invisible dimension, causing the actual body of that person to waste away,

*Page 211 |*

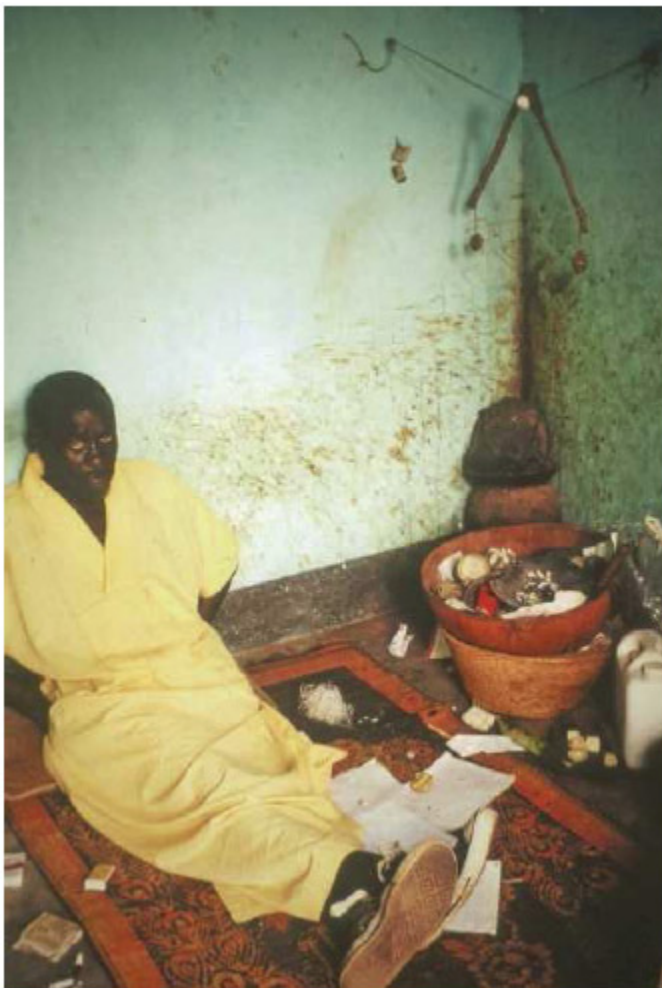
unresponsive to any medical interventions, until death does occur. Their new recruits are required to supply a beloved relative for their initiatory feast. Most of the scholarly literature on African diviners contrasts them with witches, portraying them as antagonists and opposites: Diviners protect against witchcraft, they are healers, and, in prescribing sacrifice, they are ritual specialists akin to priests. Whereas witches cause misfortune and death, diviners usher in prosperity and healing. On the ground, so to speak, it is another matter. Some diviners themselves, for example, have no compunction about claiming they too are witches (a term as heavily charged with negative nuance in many indigenous languages as it is in English or French), while others will simply shrug at the suggestion. One asked me sagely, “Who knows what doing good is?”

## THE GEOMANCER AND HIS WASPS

Diarra Souleymane was what Muslims called him, but he was better known by Dé Tchéclezo, his name in the language of his ethnic group, the Senoufo. He was a geomancer. No one had warned me that he was a leper, and so I was unprepared. When we first met, his eyes fixed intently on mine, daring me to look at the stumps of his hands and feet. I extended my hand and grasped his wrist in greeting. He pulled his caftan around him and sat on the mat on the

floor, extending his legs out before him, crossed at the ankle. He grinned. He was missing his front bottom teeth and his lip hung open from his lower jaw. I focused on the sand pile he would use for his palimpsest. He spat into his palms with a loud popping sound and reached out the stump of his left hand to cover a small wasp nest clinging to the wall behind him. Two wasps exited the knobby mud cove. They crawled along the wall toward him and rested there as if awaiting his words. He glanced over at them and then lifted his lids, checking to see if I had noticed. Then he lowered his head to murmur a prayer.

He spread the fine sand, sweeping it gently from the corner across the floor, smoothing it until it was level. With what was left of his right thumb, he etched short vertical lines from right to left in rapid succession, making five rows in all. Across the bottom he drew a horizontal squiggle, circled the entire table, and then, with small staccato moves, poked the sand with seemingly random jabs. He asked my name and chanted. At last he sat back and began his assessment.



***Diarra Souleymane, 1997.*** This geomancer, better known by the name *Dé Tchéclezo*, uses markings in sand in his divination practices. He is also reputed to be a great “witch,” able to use wasps as his “soldiers,” sending them out on missions to sting and destroy the enemies of his clients. © **LAURA GRILLO.**

Whether or not your work will be a success, that is what is on your heart.



Everything that you are doing here to make it succeed is what is preoccupying you the most. Don't worry; your work will go forward. You must pray. You are going to be married soon, but your work is what is troubling you. That's why you've come. You want to know more about this practice, to see what it is I do.

*Page 212 |*

The diagnosis was right, and there was more. He described diviners I'd seen over the preceding months and identified their prescriptions. He told me whose was more accurate or propitious. He told me the woman waiting for me outside (Hélène, who had accompanied me on this expedition) was ill and had pains in her joints. In fact, her jaw and neck had ached so badly that for months she'd been unable to work. He told me I had nightmares but that they would bring me luck.

When the consultation ended, he bragged of his other powers. "If I weren't sick with a cold, I'd show you just how strong I am," he said. "I'd bring out a calabash and fill it with water and without any fire, make it boil right in front of your eyes." I asked him about the wasps. "The wasps are like soldiers. They are my messengers and they do my work at my bidding, see?" He clapped his palms together, and the two wasps that had retreated to their enclosure wriggled back out and edged toward him. There was something vaguely menacing in these explanations, a suggestion of mercilessness beyond an insect's sting. Later, one of his long-time clients told me that Dé Tchéclezo had destroyed her enemies. "Did he show you his wasps? He can send them out to sting an enemy. It doesn't matter where. They'll find him and then come back. Those are no ordinary insects. They're his genies.... When they sting, you're finished. You won't be long for this world." It was the surest confirmation. The sandcaster was also a "witch." His power was a gun for hire.

## **WITCHES' TALK**

That night I was visited by suffocating nightmarish spirits. At first it was a dream. I was standing among some people, Africans, but I didn't know them. They were milling about a cooking pot and called me over to come eat. I'd thought to myself, Aha. Now we'll see what this is all about. In folklore and in daily references to the world of witches, it is said that if you are called to eat meat in a dream, you are being invited to join a coven and will make a human sacrifice for the privilege. Once you eat the human flesh, you are never released from being one of them, doomed to use your spiritual gifts for their wickedness. Aware even in my dream that I was dreaming, I decided to defy them and prove that none of it was real. Just as I took the meat I woke up with a start.

The room was in perfect blackness. Still, I had my bearings. I could hear Hélène in the next bed quietly breathing. As I lay there thinking about the challenge I had posed in the dream, a mosquito (or a wasp?) spun at my ear. Its strange buzzing grew to a drone. Then it changed. It was more like the distant murmur of a crowd mumbling strange syllables. The garbled grumbling grew louder, growling to the pitch of an engine and approaching fast. My heart began pounding. Voices boomed near my bed. I tried to cry out. I was paralyzed, pinned to the bed, my mouth clamped shut. "Hé-lè-ne!" I tried to form the word. My lips and tongue were leaden. "Hé-lène!" A rumor of voices now swirled around me. "Hélène!" The muffled syllables seeped through clenched teeth. Hélène woke up and nudged me. "Laura! Wake up, Laura!"

She shook my shoulder more and more forcefully until at last I felt my jaw relax, and my chest heave to take in air. "Laura, what is it?" "My God, Hélène, I don't know...." I sat up, still tense with terror, listening to the voices recede. She was trembling. I told her it was a nightmare, to go back to sleep. We both lay back down in the darkness. I spent the hours until dawn waiting for the buzzing, dreading the approach of the hideous army of witches.

Page 213 |

## NEITHER "SUPERNATURAL" NOR "RELIGION"?

An empiricist could easily dismiss this extraordinary experience as a dream, and indeed I later learned of the phenomenon of dream paralysis in which the body remains immobilized, as is usual during the period of rapid eye movement (REM) that produces dreams, while awareness lingers in a liminal state between the phantasms of dream and wakefulness. A skeptic might point to my psychological vulnerability, as a weary researcher, to the powers of suggestion. (Hadn't the leper said I had nightmares?) Was it unreasonable to infer that an inclination toward "belief" would account for it all? (Who else but a "believer" would investigate "occult" practices?) Or perhaps gullibility conspired with my neurotic fears to cause this intense fantasy. (Hadn't I been warned that diviners were witches who might "steal my star"?)

There was no doubt that Hélène understood it quite literally in the local idiom of witchcraft belief. I had sought out the witches, and they had come for me. She'd warned me, after all, that I had been looking for trouble. Certainly the experience conformed in character and content to a recognized cultural standard in every detail, including an initiatory visitation by spirits, genies, or witches through dreams.

I found myself in a quandary. What was I to make of the experience? Its intensity made it impossible to deny or dismiss. Yet I could not explain it, nor could I even imagine conveying it as an anecdote without appealing to the local conventions—the very matter that the scholar is supposedly there to frame and interpret. My purpose was to advance understanding. Instead I was baffled and bereft of moorings.

In the introduction to their anthology, anthropologists Young and Goulet argue that extraordinary experiences such as these "should not be described as 'paranormal' or 'supernatural'" because these terms only reinforce the conundrum for a Western academic ( 1994, 8 ). In popular parlance, *paranormal* implies a radical distinction between the real and unreal, a proposition that impedes a serious consideration from the outset. Similarly, the very adjective *supernatural* identifies a thing *a priori* as beyond the normal plane of physical existence deemed natural, defying known physical laws. For the same reason, Young and Goulet want to distinguish the extraordinary experiences encountered in the field from religion or even new age spirituality, "which tend to view reality in terms of different dimensions" ( 1994, 8 ). That is, rather than view reality as having multiple dimensions, we might consider that reality is experienced in multiple ways, depending on the cultural context.

Moreover, Young and Goulet underscore that their focus has "nothing to do, per se, with religion," only "the social-psychological study of religious experience" ( 1994, 8 ). This strong qualification seems to stem from a desire to distinguish their consideration of such accounts from the romantic argument that religion is itself an "experience of the sacred," an exceptional

object so incommensurate with any other that it demands its own unique approach. Rather than validating the idea that religion is a singular mode of experience or dimension of reality, their aim is to emphasize that extraordinary experiences are “the normal outcome of genuine participation in social and ritual performances through which social realities are generated or constituted” ( 1994, 9 ).

In other words, the seemingly extraordinary is actually a predictable result of the totalizing experience of being there. Experiencing at firsthand the realities of life on the ground also prepares the inner ground that allows one to experience reality in another way. It was the kind of suggestion I was willing to entertain in the face of my ordeal, as a position more reassuring than the unsettling idea that reality as I understood it was at issue.

Page 214 |

## UNHOMELINESS AND THE UNCANNY

In his classic work *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss presents a startlingly candid account of this unique quandary and suggests how it is that anthropologists come to experience reality in another way: “His conditions of life and work physically cuts him off from his group for long periods; the brutality of changes to which he is exposed makes him acquire a sort of chronic uprootedness: never more able to feel himself ‘at home’ anywhere, he will remain psychologically mutilated” (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 41; translation mine).

As we have seen, Freud taught us that “the uncanny” is itself an experience of rupture with the familiar, a brutal shift from what is framed as intimate and safe to the alien. It is an unhomely sense of out-of-placeness that disturbs. It is easy to see that radical uprootedness is itself an uncanny position, and it may open the way for an extraordinary experience of an even deeper kind.

This is not to suggest that they are themselves experiences of psychological “mutilation” or breakdown. Rather, the unhomely may be a necessary precondition for the penetration of another way of viewing and experiencing the world of the other. Ghosts, witches, and other uncanny phenomena “make their appearance in the ‘potential space’ between intrapsychic and external worlds” ( Jackson 2012, 85 ). They are not so much a bridge between two different but stable worldviews, but the destabilizing state that allows one to penetrate another culture.

## PENETRATING CULTURE AND CULTURAL PENETRATION

It may therefore be inevitable that in the attempt to suspend one's social conditioning, to penetrate the symbolic life-world of such a culture, the researcher begins to think in terms of local categories. It is normal that the images and symbols of that life-world would infuse one's imagination and infiltrate one's dreams. In this way, the “extraordinary experiences” of anthropologists and other cultural investigators could be understood as a by-product of their deepened knowledge, “a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated *by*) another form of life, of having, one way or another truly ‘been there’” ( Geertz 1988 , 4–5).

I did indeed feel penetrated by the terrifying ordeal. The unexpected immediacy and uninvited

intensity of the episode left me shaken. It presented a shocking challenge to my usual, singular sense of reality. I had been struck by that kind of dread that Otto said “penetrates to the very marrow, making hair bristle and ... limbs quake.” I had lain awake trembling, convinced that what I experienced was something other than a dream. It did not feel like anything I associated with the holy, but it was, most definitely wholly other.

With his usual style of musing that mingles anthropology, poetry, philosophy, and memoir, Michael Jackson observes that anthropology “urges us not to subjugate lived experience to the tyranny of reason or the consolation of order but to cultivate that quality which Keats called negative capability—the capability of ‘being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’” ( Jackson 1989, 16 ). Although we may hope to bridge the perspectival gap between us and other, we need not completely close it.

*Page 215 |*

## **INTIMATE CHOICES**

Rather than linger over any question about whether my experience was real or illusory, I contemplated the momentous choice that I felt the dream and the encounter had forced upon me. In the dream I knew that witches were offering me deeper knowledge into the occult through initiation. I was ready to accept it, but only as an act of arrogant disbelief and defiance. I was going to show them. The horror of the risk woke and rescued me. What followed was a “shift from merely entertaining an idea to actually embodying it” ( Jackson 1989, 111 ). I had to make an unequivocal choice between my own (parochial?) sense of good and evil and about how far across the participant/observer divide I was ready to venture, even as I relinquished any certainty about the reality of the experience. With palpating and paralyzing fear and struggle, I shook off the approaching witches coming to show me.

More important for me than whether I believed in witches or the empirical reality of their visitation was that the experience had forced me to see that the worldviews in which I had become enmeshed did not present an abstract theory of knowledge about the world but was a particular and powerful way of living and being in the world ( Jackson 2012, 123 ). In Côte d'Ivoire, witchcraft and divination were the invisible and visible “total social phenomena” ( Mauss [1954] 2002 ). They acted in all directions, informed the whole of society and its institutions, and dictated the rules of comportment, especially the most intimate relations.

Ultimately, I came to feel that my uncanny experiences with diviners had led me to interpret divination as an ethical issue more than a matter of faith or reason, belief, or skepticism. The many sacrifices they prescribed sent me out of the private consulting rooms and into the marketplaces and crossroads, made me seek out babies or the infirm to give alms, had me distribute meat into the community, feeding many of whom I would never meet. It placed me in the world in which personal coping means being in relation with others with care.

That most daunting uncanny encounter in the night forced me to confront the more personal questions about what I was really up to: What is now required of me in light of this experience? To what do I owe those who fostered this immersion experience (informants, diviners, friends and family), and to what do I owe the scholarly world (teachers and advisers, students and colleagues, publishers and readers)? Does integrity compel me to discuss it in my academic

work, or does my status as a scholar (and perhaps my professional future) require that I bracket any discussion of my unsettling experiences instead? Am I duty bound to risk self-revelation or confession in order to push the boundaries of philosophical inquiry, or would such vulnerability render the entirety of my work suspect?

## THE QUEST FOR A BROADER VIEW

The preeminent historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, charged that the history of religions as a discipline would “fulfill its true cultural function” only by “attempting to understand the existential situations” expressed in religious experience, for only through this kind of probing philosophical investigation can we hope to “attain to a deeper knowledge of [the hu]man” ( 1969 , 2–3). To accomplish this bold task, Eliade called for the application of creative hermeneutics—an interpretative enterprise that risks encounter and does not shy away from personal experience. The most fertile discoveries offering the most profound ramifications, he suggested, will be made in “a meeting with the ‘foreign,’ the unknown, with what cannot be reduced to familiar categories—in short, with the ‘wholly other,’” which is not necessarily with

Page 216 |

“the sacred” as typically conceived in religious thought, but what he categorizes as “parareligious experiences” ( 1969 , 3–4). Moreover, creative hermeneutics changes the thinker as well as those who engage that thinker's ideas. This prescription for the renewal of the field, which Eliade made almost fifty years ago, invites and gives license to investigations into the extraordinary and uncanny.

If many long shrank from Eliade's clarion call, it was because it set a standard that was considered either impossibly lofty or unsuitable to the “scientific study” of religions, because he claimed that “creative hermeneutics *changes* man; it is more than instruction, it is also a spiritual technique susceptible of modifying the quality of existence itself... A good history of religions book ought to produce in the reader an action of *awakening*” ( 1969, 62 ). Eliade clearly considered the history of religions to be a philosophical enterprise and not a scientific endeavor, one that was more about meaning-making than empirical facts or historical record ( Eliade in Girardot and Ricketts 1982, 113 ).

Even granting that, however, Eliade's challenge to engage in “creative hermeneutics” is untenable because it makes transformation the goal and endpoint of study, rather than its *beginning*: The historian of religions “will feel the consequences of his own hermeneutical work” ( 1969, 62 ).

Investigation into the kinds of spiritual experiences that change human beings, that awaken the sensibility of one's existential situation in the cosmos, and that deepen philosophical knowledge of the human condition may be less objectionable and more pressing when it is initiated not by a desire to transform the reader, but by the unexpected “spiritual shock” experienced by the researcher who ordinarily believes him- or herself to be impervious to the influence of the data ( Eliade 1969 ). Unbidden and unwelcome, these troubling events are transformative for the researcher precisely because one cannot adequately account for them. I intentionally use the verb “account” here to suggest the twin conundrum facing someone confronted with the uncanny: how to explain and how to relate such experiences.

## THE HORROR OF BEING A DUPE

Those who produce “works of erudition,” and maybe especially scholars of religious phenomena (who are sensitive to the charge that they are necessarily religious and inclined to take subjective experience as truth), can relate to Eliade's confession that he had “a horror of dilettantism, improvisation, ‘hearsay science,’... [a] terror of being deceived, of being led into error by a charlatan or ignoramus, of building on the foundation of inaccurate assertions” and—perhaps most of all—a “fear of not being taken seriously” ( Girardot and Ricketts 1982, 114 ). As a result, Eliade felt compelled to provide documentation of sources to an excessive degree that he felt marred his philosophical works ( Eliade 1969, 115 ). But no amount of source citation can corroborate the confrontation with a seemingly impossible experience and the anxiety that it arouses, precisely because it seems to defy the adequacy of our received methodologies.

Useful interpretation cannot reasonably depend on a naively literal appeal to informants' explanations. But for many scholars who have had extraordinary experiences, relegating them to memoir seems too solipsistic to offer anything more salutary. The first suggests, at best, a collapse of objectivity unworthy of a scholar or, at worst, the notion that one has succumbed to chicanery and been duped. The second option amounts to little more than “hearsay science,” whereas the turn to a literary form may itself be dismissed as “dilettantism.” (Eliade himself

*Page 217 |*

skirted the issue by embedding his ruminations on the uncanny in his fiction, for which he was renowned.)

## BLURRED GENRES

Today it is readily accepted that there is no such thing as an objective account. We are all always inevitably woven into human relationships and the cultural complexities of navigating all the messy aspects of human life. We no longer have confidence in a “constant, substantive ‘self’ which can address constant, substantive ‘others’ as objects of knowledge. We are continually being changed by as well as changing the experience of others” ( Jackson 1989, 3 ).

Consequently, a growing body of literature has emerged that self-consciously experiments with the creative blurring of ethnography and memoir. It comes from the recognition that we are always enmeshed in a human situation and that the totalizing experience of fieldwork is complete only if it includes an account of the “informed subjectivity” of the ethnographer as an integral part of the “data” ( Young and Goulet 1994, 215 ). We are inextricably bound to our work.

With the voyage taken and the experience had, we experimenters in cultural entanglement return home and then face the daunting task of “writing it up.” A notorious divide exists between “being there” and “being here.” It is not only due to the existential gulf that makes us feel permanently “unhomed.” It is also due to an awareness of the gap between the fullness of experience and the limits of the written account. In my case, I felt that no academic discourse could convey the startling accuracy of the diviners' readings. Mere assertion without evidence

would be dismissed. A fuller illustration inevitably called for disclosure of some of the facts of my life. A mere academic treatise about the practices of divination could not have done justice to the private and personal grappling that the ritual elicits. At the same time, a novel or fictionalized account about my encounters with these seers and spiritual guides would have undercut the very thing that made these experiences powerful—they were true. I decided that the memoir was the only viable genre for my subject. The anecdotes I related here are drawn from that as-yet unpublished work. I took heart in the straightforward acknowledgment by historian of religions Wendy Doniger that “all truly creative scholarship in the humanities is autobiographical” ( McCutcheon 1999, 336 ).

Just as the voyage risks encounter, its account entails risk. “In venturing beyond the borders of orthodox science, we may be accused of departing from empirical truth and being unprofessional, or, worse, of pure invention. But there may be a middle ground, where anecdote enriches rather than invalidates our work” ( Jackson 2012, 17 ). At least it is a humble acknowledgment that this is what we share with all humanity—that we can only offer a provisional account of who we are and what we know, that we struggle to make sense of the world, but that the effort is edifying.

## Summary

If “the world of everyday life is ... not our *only* experience” ( Young and Goulet 1994, 317 ), it is also true that everyday life is not only *our* experience. The certain but inexplicable knowledge that diviners demonstrated seemed to suggest that we are not the discrete individuals we think

*Page 218 |*

we are, impenetrable and isolated in our private world. These interhuman interactions are not the kind that cause hair to stand on end, though. Those extraordinary encounters and uncanny events that point to other dimensions of existence or the existence of other kinds of beings give me greater pause. The honest testimonies of those experiences as well attest to the fact that the “supernatural” is part of the larger record of human existence. Their context-specific nature, their archetypal patterns, and the significance they hold in cultures attest to the fact that they are socially constructed as much as they are intimate psychological phenomena, for at the very least, they serve as a basis for dealing with the troubling conundrums of life.

I was visited by witches—or not. What I know is that the great dreadful experience, beyond ken or control, was intense, intimate, and uprooting ... and it had its total impact on me. Maybe the leper was right: my “nightmare” brought me luck. “Paradoxically, those who can do me most harm are the very people who can do me most good, for the things of greatest power and value always lie beyond one's ken, outside one's own circle, or in the hands of others” ( Jackson 2007, 225 ). My uncanny encounters with diviners *and* witches caused me to rethink reality and reason, religion and spirituality, psychological wholeness and ethical accountability. Whether or not you “believe” is not as important as seeing the value in venturing to the margins of what is known and understood and letting oneself be changed.

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