

# The Dynamics of African Traditional Religion

## Divination and Problem-Solving

Notes by Jon P. Kirby

### **What has Divination got to do with it?**

Divination is the key to problem-solving  
In Africa all serious, life-threatening and  
destiny-threatening problems involve the unseen  
world.

Their solution must also involve unseen entities

Necessitates professional “seers” or diviners  
Diviners help those responsible to discern the  
source of the problems.  
Diviners also point to the appropriate solutions.  
Problems are then solved by those responsible

### Dynamics of Divination

## UNSEEN WORLD

*Uncreated God*

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*Created Entities in Unseen World*

*Divinities*

*Ancestors*

*Nature Spirits & Disembodied humans*

Completing destiny

Setting destiny

## SEEN WORLD

*Humans*

Fortune & Misfortunes

Diviners & Shrine custodians

Use of shrines for protection & life enhancement

### **Levels of Problem-Solving**

- Trans-territorial: God
- Territorial: Earth shrines
- Familial: Ancestor shrines
- Personal: Individual shrines & “medicines”

### **Trans-territorial Level**

Problems that include everyone and everything,  
associated with overarching sky & sun, thus “Sky  
God”

- “Ngai”, “Nyankoton” “Nyankopon”
- God’s shrine = “*wun-tanga*” (sky-stone)

Trans-territorial “problems” = God-problems

- Trans-territorial, wide as the sky, global,  
world-wide

- Epidemics, pandemics, national disasters,  
general drought, general famine

Those who “know God” “God people” in charge

- Relationship is non-contractual, one-way
- “Who can know God?”

“Sacrifices to God are lies”

- God did not initiate relationship with man.  
Man cannot presume to sacrifice to God.
- Therefore: appeal only via “white  
offerings” or to “God people”

### **Territorial Level**

Problems of people living within a given territory  
Examples: localized drought, famine, disease,  
disasters, etc.

Different shrines have different ranges of control:

- nation state (Asante “Bosom Pra”)

- whole ethnic group (Bono “Mansa”)
- a number of villages (typical earth shrines)
- one village/town (Krakye-Dente)

Main reasons for territorial problems = breaking shrine taboos:

- Spoilt Earth = war, murder, breaking serious taboos
- Bad Death (suicide, in childbirth etc)

Role: protect and nurture life within their domain

Contractual:

- Initiated by man: “You are our god; we are your people”
- Thus sacrificial placation: “put food in the mouth of trouble.”

### Familial Level

The extended family; those linked by a common apical ancestor (usually 5 generations deep) “House”, lineage, or family group that share same identity, “blood” (*abusua*) or ancestral spirits (*yin*).

Ancestors have authority; “Elders in charge”; family must follow will of ancestors; eldest = shrine custodian.

Ancestors nurture life of the family, offer protection against threats to family and solve lineage problems.

Involves sacrifice to ancestral shrines at yearly renewals, funerals and in times of crisis.

### House Problems

Spoiled House	Incest
Rejection of Authority	Lightening
Disharmony in house	Serious Illness
Neglect of sacrifices	Spoiled womb
Oaths	First fruits
Outdooring	Witchcraft protection
Ancestor sanction	Witchcraft accusation
Taboos	Birth defects
Pregnancy	Spirit vengeance
Soul fright	Mortuary rites
Sudden death	Building a house

### Personal Level

The individual person and/or wife and children who are all bound by same destiny/spirit

The personal destiny and associated shrine (*kra*, *afili*, *wun*, *nyeme* etc.) of the person.

Various named: “destiny” “guardian spirit”, “tutelary spirit”

Role: to assist in attaining a “good fate”

Most serious problems and issues arise from destiny-threatening misfortunes (leading to ‘bad death’ or not becoming an ancestor)

All sorts of personal problems and issues arise  
Many ways of responding: Herbalists, Malams, Medicine practitioners, amulets, medicines, Western medicine, Christian sacramentals

### Individual Level Problems

Adultery/cuckold	Projectile magic
Truth oracle	Poison
Madness	Tie, Escape
Strength	Evil mouth
Theft	Bite
Get wife/Keep wife	Keep money
Increase	Talismans
Crying in the night	Bad dreams
Bad luck/good luck	Fertility
Love magic	Farming magic
School magic	Job magic
Elopement magic	Journey
Funeral	

### Four Aspects of Divination

1. Act of divining or consulting a diviner
  - Early (at dawn), alone, small fee
  - “consult the bag” (source of truth is shrine/not diviner)
2. Practitioner: diviner, ‘soothsayer’ (owner of bag)
  - Inherited or “chosen” (by spirit affliction)
  - Initiated by sr. diviner
3. The apparatus: “diviner’s paraphernalia” (stick, cowries, bag, other ritual objects) “fed” by diviner.
4. The shrine (other than the apparatus) wherein the power/spirit(s) reside and guide the process.
  - The goatskin “bag” (made from sacrificed animal)
  - The horn (made from animal horn) and medicines associated with shrine/spirit(s)

### Kinds of Divination

Traditional standard:

Casting of cowries (*Ten Cowries*, Bascom)

Geomancy (reading pito dregs)

Possession by fairies (*jinn*)

- Men use violin, *bieku*, behind a screen
- Women (rattles, calabashes)
- Fire dance (Dagbon)

Use of wand (usually after cowries)

Carrying of corpse at funerals (Gur peoples)  
 Spirit possession (various forms, cults)  
 Witch-catching cults with oracles (Tigare, Kunde, Gurumande)  
 Earth shrines with associated oracles or trial by ordeal

### Muslim Influenced Divination

Divination is not officially practiced  
 But 1,000-yr history of malam divination (using sand) & amulet magic (using Qu'ranic verses)  
 Sand divining (*Nupe*, Nadel) presumes problems (palaver) in 4 areas (talū): house/ancestors, woman, animals/things, destiny  
 Combined sand, cowries, other objects  
 Highly specialized at the personal problem level:
 

- Attracting a wife or husband
- Preventing an enemy
- Getting a good job
- Getting money

 Future oriented (presumes client seeks success)
 

- Address present misfortune
- See anything bad, hidden or on the horizon
- Prevent future possible misfortune
- Attract good fate and success for future
- Attract “blessings” and Merit (lada)

 Highly interactive—asks questions, notes behavior  
 Expert psychology, gives “white” advice  
 Aim is to convince & make money: uses gimmicks, perfume & smoke to attract spirits, slight of hand, visual effects, etc.  
 Offer specific solutions (often involving malams)

### **Shrines**

Shrines are the physical artifacts and places where the forces of the seen and unseen world meet.  
 The physical construct of a “shrine” is often a pot or calabash in which herbs and calcinated vegetable matter are kept, or steeped.  
 Sometimes other artifacts, manmade objects, masks, sculptured or molded figures, animal horns  
 Located at special places in the room, house, grove  
 Other key points: crossroads, bola, ant-hills  
 Shrine-custodians maintain the shrines and relationships with the spirit of the shrine.  
 Offices are inherited, discerned through divination, spirit possession, involve initiations and symbolic agreement of the spirits.

### **Spirit / Shrine**

No world for “spirit” or “shrine” in African languages  
 The use of “spirit”= Western dichotomy between the living and the dead, the material/natural and the spiritual/supernatural.  
 The one pouring a libation says, “I am going to give water to my grandfather”  
 No linguistic distinction between:
 

- giving a living old man a drink and
- pouring a libation to a deceased ancestor.

### **Shrines & Problem-Solving**

Serious problems are always rooted in the unseen.  
 Solutions always require sacrifices at the shrines.  
 Reasons for problems are two-fold / sacrifice is two-fold:  
 Enemy Spirits attack or take life (needs disjunctive sac)  
 Helpful Spirit withhold help (requires conjunctive sac)  
 Disjunctive sacrifice separates from harmful spirits  
 Conjunctive sacrifice (including “white offerings”) joins to helpful spirits  
 Sacrifice is always *in addition to* any other scientific, practical, technical or medical solutions.  
 Sacrifices mend broken relationships with spirits by pacifying or substituting another victim.  
 “Putting food into the mouth of trouble”

### **Physical makeup of shrines**

Most commonly the shrine is, or is contained in, a hump, dome, stone slab, cylinder or column of clay and plastered gravel  
 The actual sacred object is often a stone or piece of iron incorporated in the ‘altar’  
 This same physical form may be used as a place for sitting or putting things (‘earth-bench’ and a cylindrical clay ‘occasional table’ are usually to the right and left of the doorway, just inside, as you enter a woman’s room.  
 Sometimes as a larger ‘dais’ for a chief to sit, as well as being a ‘shrine’ or ‘altar’

### **Rituals & Shrines**

Rituals are enactments at shrines  
 Involve sacrifices and renewals: “fixing it; making it better, giving it food” in stages:  
 Libation (water or beer)

**Invocation/prayer**

Sacrifice (receive your chicken, etc)

Offering cooked food (esp. liver)

Types of Sacrifices and offerings:

Sacrifices of disjunction (red) against misfortune

Sacrifices of radical disjunction (black) against death

Sacrifices of conjunction (white) for “sweet head”

White offerings for “lada” radical conjunction = beads, cowries, coins, cloth, string, mixed uncooked grains, cooked plain rice, Fulani cheese, milk, honey, sugar, masa, fulah, etc.

**Witches**

Belief in Witchcraft is an African universal.

In West “Witchcraft” = “supernatural”

In Africa part of the real everyday world.

Explains unexpected or unusual illness & death

Usually deaths of children or young people

Experienced in dreams when spirit leaves the body

At night they leave their body and “fly” to victims

Eat the ‘spirits’ of their victims

Some use witchcraft “medicine” to bewitch

Sometimes seen as a disease rather than a culpable offence.

Victims appear fine but slowly sicken and die.

**Witchcraft Accusation**

Someone dies or a tragedy occurs ending in death

Public opinion is aroused; someone is suspected and accused.

Suspects are usually:

Elderly females, relatives or member of the house

Dagbani “witch” = old woman (thus potentially all old women)

One who stands out: wealthy, stingy, unsociable

If the suspect does not confess, trial by ordeal or by a “witch-finder” who can “see” the culprit.

The witch confesses and/or is shamed (‘Woo, woo!’) is beaten by a circle of villagers.

Often leads to death or banishment to “witch village”

**Witch Villages**

Gambaga, Patinga, Kukuo, Gnani, Yongduni are some of the witch villages of the North.

Earth priests of the place have the power to neutralize their witchcraft.

The Earth shrine quarter becomes a ‘city of refuge’ where accused can live unmolested.

**True or False?**

Not at Question of True or False.

There are different levels of explanation here:

The facts of the event

The interpretation (“misfortune”)

“Misfortune” implies interpretation: a “VALUE” a “FORTUNE” or a “GOOD”

Empirical science only explains the physical circumstances of the event--not whether it is “good” or “bad”

No physical evidence in Ghana that anyone consciously practices witchcraft

More science and education will not eliminate the need for interpretation or “why” question.

**Really Exist?**

Witchcraft beliefs try to explain or interpret why the expected good was not achieved.

Witchcraft seeks a wider context of explanation: the event’s meaning in terms of what society regards as good and true.

It tries to answer the q. “why” in terms of communal values

Africa blames personal forces: enemies

Then only problem is to locate the “enemy”

In this case the “enemy” is within i.e. the witch

Westerners blame impersonal forces

**Science vs Religion?**

Westerners say: “Witchcraft and Magic is African science”

Not true! We are learning more and more about depth and accuracy of African “indigenous knowledge” (about their vast knowledge of plants and animals, medicines, weather etc)

Shows a misunderstanding of “Science”

Goal of all science is to explain, but the human experience doesn’t stop with facts. It also requires meanings. Thus 2 levels of science.

Goal of narrow science of empirical facts is what actually is the case. It involves a commitment to the status-quo .

Goal of broader science of correct meanings is what ought to be. It involves a commitment to “the right” and “the true”, “the good”

Here we situate beliefs about Witchcraft and “enemyship”

They explain why the good and true was not achieved

African Religions typically seek both goals.