

## *Sortes virtuales*

### **A comparative approach to digital divination**

**D**ivination, or at least that branch of it that was once called inductive divination, may perhaps be considered an early form of information technology: it involves an input of information as well as an output of information, and between them, there is a process of random access to a kind of retrieval system. At any rate, divination has proven to be almost the ideal form of religious practice for the internet; in principle, at least, an act of divination may be fully accomplished on a personal computer. This paper will comparatively explore a number of perspectives on these relatively recent developments, which may possibly also help us towards a more qualified understanding of traditional forms of divination.

Many years ago, I developed a model for the analysis of divination procedures. Any act of divination involves, I believe, three successive elements:

1. An experiment or an observation of non-predictable features, leading to
2. An exemplar text, and
3. An *ad hoc* interpretation of the exemplar text as relevant to the case in hand.

Since I have already presented this model at an International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) symposium on methodology in 1997 here in Åbo (Podemann Sørensen 1999), I shall be very brief about it, but for the sake of illustration, let us consider an easy example: on the fringes of the Protestant churches of northern Europe, there exists a divinatory practice involving so-called 'manna-grains'. Manna-grains are tiny pieces of paper with biblical references drawn at random from a tray. This experiment thus leads the consultant directly into the exemplar text, the Bible; the verse indicated in the reference is looked up and interpreted *ad hoc*, that is to say as a relevant statement on the matter in hand. Instead of seeking advice from the Bible in texts known to deal with rules of conduct or practical wisdom, the user of manna-grains leaves the choice of a text to chance, or to God, and in this way rules out any

question of relevance: the biblical text found by the divinatory act *is* relevant and must be made to bear on the matter in hand. This will sometimes involve allegorical interpretation and highly creative forms of hermeneutics.

The famous Chinese book of divination, the *Yijing*, is used in a very similar manner. An experiment with yarrow stalks or coins generates a hexagram.<sup>1</sup> Each of the 64 possible hexagrams has a chapter in the *Yijing*, and texts from this chapter, often proverbial in style, will eventually be interpreted and brought to bear on the situation of the client. The West African *Ifa* or *Fa* system of divination, which has now spread all over the world, works in a perfectly analogous manner: experiments with palm nuts generate an octogram. To each of the 256 possible octograms corresponds a number of oral texts. The diviner will recite one of the texts belonging to the octogram generated, and this text, which is proverbial and narrative in style and usually prescribes offerings that must be made in order for the client to succeed in his dealings, will be the basis for decisions.

The relative weight and importance of the stages in the divinatory process is different in the different traditions. In classical *Ifa*, the diviner should not even know the problem of the client, whereas the *Yijing* specialist will typically insist that the problem is stated very accurately. The user of manna-grains will sometimes take the biblical text just as an encouragement, not as leading directly to some precise decision or prediction, while the *Ifa* client simply has to bring the offerings prescribed. The roles taken in the negotiation towards decisions between the diviner and the client also vary greatly from tradition to tradition and even within the greater traditions.

The model as such is nothing more than a handy questionnaire, or a means of structuring an examination of a given divinatory procedure. In many cases, the divinatory process will run through more, or possibly fewer stages. The important point is that the process of divination consists in what I now call a metamorphosis of signs. It is a gradual ascription of more and more relevant meaning to originally insignificant observations such as the appetite of chickens, perforations in the entrails of a sacrificial animal, or the number of yarrow stalks left when you remove four as many times as you can from a heap of unknown size. Even a hexagram or an octogram are not yet signs, but become signs only in the light of the exemplar text, which attaches a still not complete and useful meaning to them. Even now, the very open and often enigmatic exemplar texts are verbal signs, but still not precise and pertinent in

1 For a good practical description of the technicalities of traditional procedures for consulting the *Yijing*, cf. Blofeld 1968: 59–71.

their meanings. Only when applied to the problem or the situation of a client do their proverbial or symbolic statements acquire useful meanings.

It is this manipulated growth of meaning, almost by insensible degrees, that makes the outcome of an act of divination look very much like a revelation, a statement that has authority because its origin is beyond the situation it deals with. And it is precisely this metamorphosis of signs that a digital divination procedure must be able to perform. As a matter of fact, the three systems of divination already mentioned: manna-grains, *Yijing* and *Ifa*, do all exist as digital options. A Danish website (Hapasu.dk 2012), designed by Hans Pauli Sundstein, offers 760 manna-grains, selected from the 1992 Danish translation of the Bible and introduced by the short prayer: 'May God bless his word for you in rich measure.' A grain is picked by clicking on one of the 760 numbers on the page. Quite as if it had been picked from a tray, a biblical reference appears, and one more click makes the biblical text itself appear, even with a link to the context from which it was taken – and a link back to the page with the 760 numbers, where a new manna-grain may be picked. The conclusion is easy to draw: there is nothing in the traditional manna-grain procedure that this digital version cannot fully perform and accomplish. And for people with a visual handicap like the designer, it offers the possibility that with the relevant equipment, manna-grains may be used without an assistant.

Manna-grains are obviously easily digitalized. It is a very straightforward form of divination, and above all, its diviner and its client are one and the same person or group of persons. It does not involve a negotiation concerning the matter in hand, except for the one that goes on in the mind of the client when faced with what is God's word for her or him. Other forms of divination are much more of a challenge. Websites proffering *Yijing* consultations usually remain faithful to tradition insofar as a question must be asked at the outset. Sometimes also its context of relevance – for example, family and friends, business and career etc. – must be stated. In addition, the user may sometimes choose between the age-old method of using the yarrow stalks, the simpler method with coins and sometimes a third method. It is difficult to ascertain how this choice affects the outcome, but all these methods are basically methods of randomization. It seems that this randomization is really accomplished. The user will get a hexagram with young and old lines and often the choice between the two classical translations, that of James Legge and the celebrated Wilhelm translation and in addition sometimes also a modern, psychologizing adaptation of the traditional text.<sup>2</sup> Left with a more or less

2 Cf. Virtual I-Ching 2012 and Psychic Science 2012.

canonical text, the digital client must, for the rest of the procedure, be his own diviner, very much as is the user of manna-grains. One of the websites proffering online consultations of the *Yijing* (Facade 2012) has probably tried to remedy the lack of an experienced and empathic diviner by a slight de-randomization of the selection of hexagrams and texts. Apparently key words in questions connect to texts with relevant content and their hexagrams. In this way the client will often find that the chapter selected has at least some passages relevant to his question. This is an obvious possibility that the digital medium has, but it may of course be debated whether this is really divination or just a manipulated search in a database.

De-randomization is, however, not limited to digital divination. Late antiquity knew a method of divination called *Sortes Astrampsychi*, a name that was probably as mystifying then as it is now (cf. Stoneman 2011: 144–7). From a book, one of 91 numbered questions was chosen by the user, who was then told to add a number between 1 and 10 to the number of the question. By consulting a special table he or she was then to convert this sum into still another number, which would then be the number of the answer. This answer would always be perfectly relevant and straightforward, for as a matter of fact the calculations recommended between the question and the answer would always lead directly from each question to one of a number of relevant answers predestined by the editors. This was obviously an extremely robust kind of de-randomization. Neither fate, providence, God, nor *dao* had any opportunity to influence the result, except through the user's choice of a number between 1 and 10. A user discovering the true nature of this editorial predestination would probably feel some degree of disappointment. It really makes modern, digital, partial de-randomization seem innocent.

West African *Ifa* divination is certainly well-known on the internet, but websites proffering an online accomplishment of an act of *Ifa* divination are very few. One of them, Ifaluede.com (no longer extant), is really nothing but an electronic correspondence with the chief priest of the Ajigbotifa Temple, who will cast *Ifa* for his electronically mediated client and send an email with the report within two days. The website does not always open, but has been the occasion of some debate. A lot of West Africans live in diaspora, and some of them find it excellent to have this opportunity to consult a classical *babalawo*. Others find it ridiculous and ask what will be next – digital sacrifice, perhaps?<sup>3</sup> Another website comes closer to a proper online divination; it proffers something called *digital opele* (the Yoruba word *opele* means

3 Cf. Nairaland Forum 2012 and Naijarules.com 2012.

‘a messenger of *Ifa*’), a ‘random generator’, which will generate an octogram, as if the procedure with the palm nuts had been accomplished. The user may then find the text corresponding to the octogram in the same website’s version of the *Ifa* text corpus.<sup>4</sup> This means that a full act of *Ifa* divination may be accomplished online. There is no negotiation with an empathic diviner, but at least classical *Ifa* divination can also be done without empathy and advice. In this case, the diviner is not expected to know the problem of the client, and all that the client has to do is to bring the sacrifices prescribed by the exemplar text recited to him.

It is interesting, however, that modern Western religiosity seems to resist forms of divination that exclude empathy and other kinds of psychological or spiritual influences on the outcome. There is a conviction, although never very explicit, that the personality and the thoughts and feelings of both client and diviner somehow influence the act of divination. This makes online divination very problematic to some potential users. In 2008, there was a debate on Pagan Network Forum (2012) in which a certain ‘Twilightgirl’ asked:

... Do people feel they can actually influence the outcome of the cards or whatever reading it is you are choosing to do with a few clicks on the mouse ... ?

Another network member replied that the client ‘must be there or at least something belonging to that person’, and a guest added that online divination meant ‘separating the querent from the Spiritual aspect of divination.’ A concomitant aspect of this doubtful attitude towards the online accomplishment of an act of divination may be the idea that a religious act must have some degree of social existence. In modern Judaism, individual prayers may be virtually placed at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, but suggestions that the *minyán* – the ten male participants necessary in liturgical prayer – may be virtually united via the internet, are met with strong objections (cf. Cohen 2012: 9–11).

The fact that mouse and monitor are probably unable to transmit the vibrations of human souls has, however, hardly limited the number of websites proffering online divination, and the more traditional idea, that divination

4 The site <[www.ifa-orisha.com/jaaps-ifa-readings/digitalopele-divination/index.html](http://www.ifa-orisha.com/jaaps-ifa-readings/digitalopele-divination/index.html)> (2012) is run by one man, Jaap Verduijn, and has now changed into a restricted membership site called Ilé Dafa. The 2012 address is no longer valid. Cf. now Ilé Dafa 2013.

transmits what we might call superhuman influence, still survives. When I was worried about giving this presentation within a field rather far from my usual studies in the religions of antiquity, I consulted the website of *The Morningstar Online Angel Oracle* (2012). According to its welcome page, Angelic energies come down upon users who click on the phrase 'Angel Guidance', written 36 times on the same page. I clicked on one of them and got the Angel of Success, a quotation from Goethe and a long text full of encouragement – so here I am! The oracle is basically a form of stichomancy, very much like manna-grains, but once again shows that a full act of divination can be accomplished online – that is, if we can do without human empathy and human unconscious influences on an otherwise random access to a treasury of exemplar texts. In no other way is digital divination less real than traditional divination. Acts of divination were always observations of the virtual: The *bab ekallim* or palace gate on an Old Babylonian liver was not the real palace gate, but a virtual one, chosen by diviners as a matrix of what would happen to the royal house (cf. Jeyes 1978 and 1989: 60–1). Similarly, the Line of Life studied in palmistry is not life itself, but a virtual biometric instrument that the diviner understands to read. And inasmuch as the observations are unpredictable or the access to exemplar texts is randomized, nothing prevents *dao*, fate, God, Providence or Angelic energies from also influencing or even governing online acts of divination.

This novel option does, however, add to an ongoing development towards very private or, as they are sometimes called, invisible<sup>5</sup> forms of religion. The very social *homo religiosus*, always engaged in building hierarchies and legitimizing the central structure of society, certainly still exists – but so do lonely twilight-girls, who may now accomplish acts of divination on a personal computer. It is a development very similar to what we find in the Greek and Demotic magical papyri of Roman Egypt (Betz 1996). In many respects, these papyri represent a miniaturization for private use of a religion that once populated huge temples with priestly hierarchies and was the very foundation of a powerful state (cf. Frankfurter 1998: 143–4, 224–37). They actually provide instruction on how to dress up as an Egyptian high priest and arrange, in your own drawing room or sleeping chamber, a face-to-face encounter with a god in a dream or some kind of self-induced vision.<sup>6</sup> Often these arranged visions served to validate a horoscope, or as the more dramatic part of other rites of divination. For many years I thought of this as the ultimate transposi-

5 The idea of 'invisible religion' was introduced by Thomas Luckmann (1967).

6 E.g. Betz 1996: 56–60 (PGM IV.930–1114).

tion of religion into individual private life. But no doubt the digital world may take us even further.

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