

J Ø R G E N P O D E M A N N S Ø R E N S E N

On Divination. An Exercise in Comparative Method

At the end of his famous essay 'Religion as a Cultural System', Clifford Geertz (1993: 125) had occasion to make the point that studies of the role of e.g. divination in reinforcing social control "with but the most general, common-sense view" of what divination is as a religious pattern seemed to him "not particularly promising." What is needed, he concludes, is "a theoretical analysis of symbolic action comparable in sophistication to what we now have for social and psychological action..." Divination is only one of his examples, and his call for theories of symbolic action has certainly not been fruitless. What I have to offer is not a new theory of symbolic action, but a modest attempt, on a comparative basis, to arrive at a slightly more sophisticated idea of divination 'as a religious pattern'. This attempt will be made with a view both to illustrate and to discuss comparative method. I shall therefore try to be very explicit about every intellectual operation involved, I hope not to the point of boredom.

Some comparative methods aim at establishing universals, others seek human causes that will account for cross-cultural or transhistorical resemblance. The sole aim of the comparative method I shall present is to improve our questionnaire. The professionalism of any discipline consists in the intelligent questions it is prepared to ask. All theories, including those claiming universals, contribute to our professional questionnaire; and that is how, in spite of the theoretical monsters we have to kill every year, our discipline has been making some progress throughout its history. Time may have come, then, to concentrate our comparative endeavours on questions to ask.

Divination is the production, observation and interpretation of signs in order to obtain a religious basis for decision and action. This working definition excludes ecstatic prophecy and straightforward clairvoyance and concentrates on what is sometimes called inductive divination. We shall consider a few divination systems from different

parts of the world¹, but before doing so we should make clear what we are after. If we want to arrive at an idea of divination as a religious pattern, I suggest that we study the structure and content of each divination procedure, giving priority to the question of how it makes sense to its users as a true basis for making decisions.

To make sense means to articulate local cosmology. The relation between divination and cosmology is perhaps easiest to grasp in the case of prodigies: In his Roman history, *Livy* is very fond of reporting prodigies alleged to have heralded the more dramatic events. He is concerned to demonstrate how observant the *maiores* were when faced with negative articulations of cosmology. When lightning had struck the temple of *Juno Lucina* in Rome and rain had fallen from a cloudless sky in Nursia and elsewhere a mule was reported to have foaled, no political action could be taken before propitiatory rites had been performed (*Ab Urbe condita* 37.3). The obvious meaning of these prodigies is that the order and equilibrium of the world, the *pax deorum*, was endangered.

No less observant were the ancient Assyrian kings in the 7th century BC. They had specialists posted all over the kingdom in order to observe and interpret prodigies and to make sure that propitiatory rituals were performed. There was a whole learned literature they could consult, whenever an unusual event seemed to herald that the normal order of things was endangered. The signs observed were sometimes considered of merely local relevance, sometimes interpreted as affecting the whole country.

In Assyria as well as in ancient Rome, the interest taken in prodigies implies the idea that single events bear witness to more general tendencies in the course of the world. A very similar idea is vaguely implied by even the simplest forms of divination, in which a question is answered with 'yes' or 'no' through some binary procedure like heads or tails. Whenever a single observation is taken to have a bearing on some different area of life, the idea of a coherent and law-bound world is appealed to. In this vague and general sense, divination will always somehow imply cosmology.

It is, however, from the study of less conspicuous and highly technical systems of divination that we may expect to arrive at the more sophisticated questionnaire we are looking for. It is also, as I hope to show, in dealing with such less conspicuous systems that a professional questionnaire will be useful. Let us consider three elaborate systems of divination:

¹ For world-wide surveys, see Caquot and Leibovici 1968; Loewe and Blacker 1981.

One of the most famous books of divination is the Chinese classic *Yi Jing*. The book as we know it today is the product of more than two millennia of elaboration and refinement, but the elementary traits of the divination procedure and the system of divination it codifies date back as early as 1000 BC. The classical method of consulting the *Yi Jing* consists in a play with yarrow stalks. After carefully stating the problem, the diviner takes his 50 sticks, returns one to its case and divides the remaining 49 into two heaps. Removing one stick from the right heap, he puts it between the fingers of his left hand and goes on to remove sticks from the left heap, 4 by 4, until 4 or less are left. This remainder of the left heap he puts between the fingers of his left hand and repeats the same procedure with the right heap. The entire content of the left hand is then put aside in a new heap, and the whole procedure is repeated twice with the remaining sticks, so that three 'left hand' heaps result from three experiments. The numerical combination created by the number of sticks in each of the three heaps will then point to either an unbroken or a broken line. According to a well known Chinese system of classification, unbroken lines are called *yang* and broken lines are called *yin*. The whole procedure is conducted six times to produce a hexagram, a figure of six horizontal yin or yang lines. Each of the 64 possible combinations of six lines has a chapter of its own in the *Yi Jing*.

The numerical combinations of the three heaps that generate a line also decide whether a line is 'young' or 'old'. According to cosmological ideas of regeneration and renewal, 'old' lines tend towards their opposite, i.e. an old yang line is considered to be about to change into a yin line and *vice versa*. This means that whenever 'old' lines are present in a hexagram, the diviner must take into consideration also the hexagram that would result from turning these lines into their opposites. In addition, each chapter of the *Yi Jing* also considers the meanings of the numerical combinations that have produced each line in the hexagram.

The system is thus fairly complicated, and the chapters themselves are obviously the product of many layers of tradition. Meaning is attached to each hexagram in quite a number of different ways. The hexagram as a whole may be interpreted as a figure and given a corresponding name, e.g. no. 50 *Ting*: a sacrificial vessel. This important ritual object offers a basis for further meanings: if the bottom line was generated by a numerical combination called no. 6, the following proverb will be relevant:

"To rid it of decaying remnants of meat, the vessel is turned upside down."

This is further qualified by the addition of a parallel proverb:

“It is not shameful to take a concubine for the sake of bearing sons” (Blofeld 1968: 183).

The general advice to be gathered is that a noble purpose may justify or necessitate what looks like an act of sacrilege or voluptuousness.

Another source of meanings is the fact that all 64 hexagrams are combinations of two out of eight possible trigrams. The trigrams are associated with a whole system of classification; they denote heaven and earth, fire and water, the cardinal points, family relationships etc. etc. Thus hexagram no. 50 is *fire over wood*. Combined with the idea of the sacrificial vessel, the hexagram points to the important activity of cooking meat for sacrifice. Sacrifice and, on the whole, ritual is what makes the world go round, and the pious, exemplar sage or holy man who sacrifices is also one who adheres to the decrees of Heaven.

Thus by way of associations which articulate and combine cosmology and morals, the text of *Yi Jing* offers a rich and differentiated basis for prediction and advice. Each hexagram provides the diviner with a set of cosmological and moral constellations in terms of which the problem stated at the outset may be interpreted. The commentaries strengthen and qualify the older basic text, giving reasons for the meaning attached to hexagrams and offering abstract predictions. The diviner must carefully steer his course through the learned book and its commentaries to obtain maximum correspondence between its cosmological symbolism and moral teachings and the case in question.

A divination system of similar complexity, but based on oral tradition, is found in West Africa among the Yoruba, who call it *Ifa* and the Fon who call it *Fa*. The diviner takes 16 palm nuts in his right hand. Holding the nuts in a firm grip he places the right hand on the palm of the left hand. Relaxing his grip a little, he lifts up his right hand again. This will make one or two palm nuts drop into the left hand. Two nuts will be noted with one line in a tray with sand, one nut with two lines. This procedure is repeated eight times to generate a pattern like this:

I II
II I
I I
II I

To each of the 256 possible combinations corresponds a set of texts which the diviner knows by heart. Learned diviners will even know

several alternative texts for each combination. The texts are mythical or exemplar narratives, in which divination often has a role to play. Another important theme of these narratives is sacrifice, since the divination procedure usually ends up with the prescription of certain offerings to secure success. Like the texts of the Yi Jing, the narratives are treated as exemplars of the matter in hand and interpreted *ad hoc*. In some traditions, the diviner is kept ignorant of both the question and the situation of the client, so that the client will have to undertake the *ad hoc* exegesis himself.

Less complicated and certainly less institutionalized are the various types of biblical divination still in use in the fringes of the protestant churches of northern Europe. The Bible is a canonical text, and outside elitarian historical and critical theology it is often straightforwardly considered as the infallible word of God, valid as a guide in any human situation. Jonathan Smith (1982: 36–52) has justly compared canon exegesis with divination. What I call biblical divination, however, includes a stochastic procedure to select a particular biblical text for guidance. The simplest technique is to open the Bible at random and take advice from whatever verses meet the eye. A slightly more sophisticated type of biblical divination is called ‘manna-grains’. Abbreviated biblical references on very small pieces of paper — almost like the flakes or grains on which the people of Israel survived in the desert — are put in a tray. The diviner picks one at random and looks up the reference in his Bible. This may be done as a variant of regular devotional reading, but also to seek advice in a particular situation (Balle-Petersen 1982). The biblical text will then be interpreted as divine advice, pertinent to the matter in hand.

Although taken from three continents, three examples will not suffice to establish universals; neither would three thousand. They will, however, enable us to develop a questionnaire to be used in future studies of still other systems of divination. We have observed that all three systems of prediction take their point of departure in unpredictable observations. There is an experiment, the result of which is at least in principle impossible to determine. But as soon as the result is obtained, it gives access to an exemplar text (and we shall understand ‘text’ in the broadest possible sense, as any pattern subject to interpretation). This text will then be considered relevant and pertinent to the case in question and interpreted *ad hoc*. This means that we may structure an inquiry into a process of divination according to the following questionnaire:

1. The experiment
2. The exemplar text
3. The *ad hoc* interpretation.

It takes no genius to arrive at this very simple questionnaire, but what exactly are the intellectual operations that take us this little step forward? The very juxtaposition of the three examples made us look for common structures and common denominators. Thus we became involved in a process of abstraction and formalization which enabled us to formulate a questionnaire that will apply to divination systems in spite of many differences in detail.

The questionnaire is, however, still a very simple one which does nothing but structure a first inquiry. To develop it further, we must consider the role played by cosmology and the ways in which the verdicts of divination acquire authority. The two questions are closely related, as it is perhaps most easily seen in the case of biblical divination. Canonical texts are, of course, authoritative, and even without appealing to logos theology the very idea of the Bible as a complete, fixed canon implies that in a religious sense the world is not deeper or bigger than revealed in the text of the Bible. The sacred book is considered the complete and ultimate key to the world, perhaps even to the extent that future events and conditions preexist in its text.

In the case of the Yi Jing, we have already observed how its text moves from the cosmic and ritual constellations to the moral order. Thus it presents the outcome of divination as a necessary result of that eternal and coherent process of transfiguration, which is the *dao* of the world.

In the case of *Fa*, it is considered the writing of the creator god Mawu (Herskovits 1938 II: 203), in which the present and the future preexist. Divination gives access to this matrix, or rather puts its stamp on the world, thus formulating rules to be followed. Fon narratives account for mythological exemplars of the technique and the process of divination. In one of these narratives (Herskovits and Herskovits 1958: 173–176), divination is a bisexual divinity, Gbadu, created by Mawu after the gods of the three kingdoms of earth, sky, and sea had appeared. Gbadu has 16 eyes and sits in a palm tree in order to watch the three kingdoms. Legba, the trickster god and the only one who understands the language of Mawu as well as the languages of all three kingdoms, has the task of opening Gbadu's eyes when she awakes. If she wants two eyes opened, she gives him one palm nut; if she wants one, she gives him two.

The roles of Legba and Gbadu in this text are due to the basic idea that, as a *deus otiosus*, Mawu governs the world in an indirect way. The world is divided into the three kingdoms, which speak different languages and do not understand the language of Mawu. Legba the linguist must act as a mediator and, according to the wish of Mawu, Gbadu is now given a similar mediating position: She receives the keys to the future, which is a house with 16 doors, corresponding to her 16 eyes. At the same time, a knowledge of the language of Mawu is given to some men (sc. the diviners). Through the technique of divination with the 16 nuts, men may thus open the eyes of Gbadu, which correspond to the doors of the house of the future, and thus see their fate. The number 16 connects the manipulations of the diviner with Gbadu, and through her with the house of the future. Another narrative (Herskovits and Herskovits 1958: 180) makes a similar point when it speaks of the 16 'secretaries' of the creator god.

The mythological role of divination is, as we have seen, that of mediating between Mawu and the world, thus replacing a more direct divine government. Fa, or Gbadu, is there to bring order to the world, for she is given her mediating position when Legba reports that the three kingdoms are in disorder, because they do not know the language of Mawu. Fa is also the origin of sacrifice (which it prescribes) and of "all the stories of the world". This refers to the vast fund of myths and narratives used as exemplar texts in divination, but in a mythological perspective it serves to emphasize the ordering and cultivating role of Fa. The role and the authority of the exemplar texts in regulating human behaviour find salient expression in the passages immediately following: Fa has brought all these stories from the sky, and "everything that happens on earth, has happened in the sky before. So Fa and Legba can advise human beings, because they themselves have discovered how to meet every possible situation in the sky." (Herskovits and Herskovits 1958: 180). The celestial and mythical order, the 'writing of Mawu' is accessible on earth through the fund of exemplar narratives administered by the divination. Thus in a double sense, Fa-divination is cosmology in practice. Its very technique is founded in myth, and through its experiment, the celestial and mythical exemplar of any human situation are found.

Added to the questionnaire we already have, the question of cosmology and authority brings out differences in the cosmologies, but at the same time serves to identify the very *raison d'être* of a divination system.

There is, of course, much more to each local system of divination than this simple questionnaire can ever bring out. No doubt it will be possible to improve and refine it, but I hope it is already visible how

it may serve as an analytic tool in the historical study of a single religion, when divination is involved.

By the very simplicity of the matter I have presented, it is my hope to have demonstrated how a comparative exercise may, through the process of abstraction and formalization that it implies, lead to the formation of notions and categories that improve our professional questionnaire.

References

Balle-Petersen, Margaretha

1982 Den brede og den smalle vej. In: *Divination. Chaos*, Særnummer: 77–87.

Blofeld, John

1968 *The Book of Change. A New Translation of the Ancient Chinese I Ching (Yi King) With Detailed Instruction for its practical Use in Divination.* London: Allen & Unwin. [2nd ed.]

Caquot, André, and Marcel Leibovici (eds.)

1968 *La divination. Études.* 2 vols. Paris: P. U. F.

Geertz, Clifford

1993 *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays.* London: Fontana Press

Herskovits, Melville J.

1938 *Dahomey. An Ancient West African Kingdom; vol. 2.* New York: Augustin.

Herskovits, Melville J., and Frances S. Herskovits

1958 *Dahomean Narrative. A Cross-Cultural Analysis.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (Northwestern University, African Studies, 1)

Loewe, Michael, and Carmen Blacker (eds.)

1981 *Oracles and Divination.* Boulder: Shambhala.

Smith, Jonathan Z.

1982 *Imagining Religion. From Babylon to Jonestown.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press