

DIVINATION AND HEALING IN AFRICAN CULTURE: EXPLORING THEIR REALITY AND RELEVANCE

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ABSTRACT

Divination is an integral part of African culture. It is a ritual practiced with the aim of seeking knowledge or guidance about past, present, and future events. Divination is not merely superstition but a sophisticated epistemological system that integrates spirituality, health, and community well-being. Each African community has unique forms and practices of divination, deeply rooted in history, mythology, and spirituality, yet all share the core function of linking the human and spiritual realms.

Diviners play a multifaceted role in African culture, serving as spiritual advisors, healers, and sources of guidance, decision-making, and problem-solving. Despite the influence of modernization and globalization, divination remains an essential part of African culture. Many Africans continue to rely on it as a means of navigating the complexities of modern life, seeking guidance on issues such as health, wealth, and relationships.

It can therefore be concluded that African epistemology regards divination as a holistic means of understanding the world—integrating physical and spiritual realities to address personal and communal concerns.

This paper examines the role of divination in African culture by comparing it with Western epistemological frameworks, exploring its role in health and healing, and analysing its continued relevance in modern African societies. While divination remains vital, the practice faces challenges such as the proliferation of fraudulent diviners, tensions with Christianity, and the struggle for integration into modern health systems. Nevertheless, divination endures as a holistic means of understanding and addressing life's challenges in contemporary Africa.

Keywords: Diviner, Culture, Health, Healing, African Epistemology.

INTRODUCTION

The African continent, credited by scholars as the cradle of humankind, has an array of functionaries with medicinal knowledge and therapeutic practices. Among them, diviners are very important because they act as agents who unveil the mysteries of human life. They also serve as the link between the physical and supernatural worlds.

Diviners embody the presence of God among people, reflecting their faith, beliefs, and moral values (Mbiti, 1975:150). Indeed, whenever people face spiritual or medical problems—especially those unresolved by Western medicine—they often turn to

diviners for answers. By implication, understanding African epistemology is a prerequisite for understanding African divination.

African epistemology emphasizes oral tradition, where knowledge is transmitted through storytelling, proverbs, and communal dialogue. It also acknowledges the importance of spirituality and ancestral knowledge in understanding the world. Unlike Western epistemology—which prioritizes empirical evidence and rationality, often excluding spiritual and intuitive knowledge—African epistemology recognizes multiple ways of knowing, including intuitive and spiritual forms.

Anyika (2024) rightly observes that African divination is an esoteric art deeply rooted in a tapestry of beliefs, subjective experiences, and individualized practices, which diverge from the pragmatic and empirical foundations of conventional wisdom.

This paper explores the dual role of divination as both a religious practice and a medical system, demonstrating how it contributes to healing, decision-making, and cultural identity. It also interrogates ethical challenges and continuity in modern contexts, particularly its coexistence with Christianity and Western medicine.

Divination as the Link Between the Physical and Spiritual Worlds in African Culture

In African culture, the spiritual and physical worlds are profoundly intertwined. They are not separate realms, but two aspects of a single reality. This interconnectedness is a fundamental aspect of African spirituality and worldview, where the spiritual realm is seen as constantly influencing and interacting with the physical world.

Although divination practices vary across different communities, the core function of connecting the physical and spiritual worlds remains consistent. Diviners play a vital role in helping people understand their place in the cosmos and navigate the complexities of life. They are considered people gifted by God to unravel the mysteries of human existence. Magesa (1998:190–192) refers to them as individuals with the power to “*sniff out*” hidden sources of disorder. Their spiritual gifts enable them to diagnose the kind of spirit or “*force substance*” causing affliction to individuals, families, or society, and to recommend the necessary steps for healing or restoring “*coolness*.”

This is important because the principle of causation remains central in African society. Misfortunes and sickness are understood to be caused by unseen powers such as ancestral spirits, evil magic, sorcery, or witchcraft. Bahlsen (2000:87) therefore concludes: “Divination appears to be one of the strongest viable systems in African thought patterns. It penetrates the spiritual realm and serves as a vehicle for reconciling the human and spiritual worlds. It is through such systems that human beings communicate with spiritual agents and vice versa.”

From this, it is evident that divination is primarily a religious endeavour. Members of society consult diviners for both private and public matters, since they function as friends

of the people, comforters, providers of assurance during crises, advisers, pastors and priests, seers, and revealers of secrets such as thefts, imminent dangers, or future events (Mbiti, 1969:177).

Diviners also observe specific taboos. Among the Chadic-speaking groups of Eastern and Southern Jos Plateau in Nigeria, for example, diviners must work only during daylight. It is taboo to work before sunrise, at noon, or after sunset, when spirits are believed to return to their wells to bathe, nap, and rest (Danfulani, 2000:104). A diviner who works during these forbidden times is believed to waste his efforts and will not obtain accurate solutions to a client's problem.

Calling and Legitimacy

The ways in which individuals are called to become diviners are diverse and complex. In some African cultures, diviners are believed to be born with a predisposition for divination, while in others the role is acquired through apprenticeship and training. In some cases, a person may also purchase mystical powers from a powerful diviner. However, such diviners are often regarded as inaccurate in their revelations and are believed to enter the profession primarily for money rather than to counteract the forces of evil. Many of these diviners are found in urban centres, and they are usually consulted by people who know little or nothing about them.

This reality underscores the importance of distinguishing genuine spiritual intermediaries from opportunists. It also explains why, during times of crisis, some individuals may consult more than one diviner. Within their context, diviners are evaluated empirically—that is, based on the accuracy of their revelations.

Divination Methods and Their Influence on Society

Different circumstances may necessitate consulting a diviner. These include visits by ghosts, sudden insanity, encounters with creatures associated with witchcraft, or the death of a family member, among others. Once consulted, a diviner may employ one of several methods to establish the cause of the problem. While methods vary across cultures, some of the most common include:

1. Casting divination – throwing objects such as bones, stones, or pieces of wood and interpreting the patterns they form.
2. Interpreting natural phenomena – observing patterns in nature, such as cloud formations, animal behavior, or the direction of the wind.
3. Spirit possession – entering a trance state or being possessed by spirits in order to receive messages or guidance.
4. Book divination – opening a sacred text and interpreting certain passages as a form of guidance.
5. Use of objects and artifacts – employing items such as cowrie shells or gourds filled with symbolic objects, whose arrangement and position are then interpreted.

6. Dream interpretation – analysing dreams, which are considered important messages from the spiritual realm.

It should be noted that some of these methods—particularly book divination—are relatively recent phenomena, showing that as society evolves, new forms of divination also emerge. In the future, it is conceivable that diviners may utilize mobile phones, social media, computers, and other modern technologies in their practice, reflecting the dynamism of African epistemologies.

The influence of diviners cuts across all sectors of society. Their clientele includes politicians, high-ranking government officials, university lecturers and students, business people, and military officers. Interestingly, even African doctors trained in Western medicine are known to consult diviners. Such widespread reliance reflects the confidence and trust many people place in them, often based on previous positive experiences.

However, Africans do not consult diviners for every problem. They recognize empirical causes and effects and take preventive measures, when necessary, such as avoiding spoiled food or acknowledging contagious diseases like leprosy. Yet, when an illness or misfortune defies empirical explanation, people often turn to diviners.

Danfulani (2000:97) captures this role succinctly:

“The diviner acts as the mediator between the victim of affliction and the afflicting spirit being. He intercedes between them by penetrating into the spirit realm and returning with an intelligible aetiology of ill health. The diviner recommends what should be done to restore health and well-being.”

From the foregoing, it is clear that divination is intricately intertwined with African concepts of health and disease. Healing practices often involve not only alleviating symptoms but also uncovering the underlying cause of illness. As a result, African healing typically integrates both clinical and spiritual interventions.

Health and Healing in African Culture

In African society, health is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. It is understood more in a social and holistic sense than in a purely biological one. Health is seen as total well-being encompassing social, physical, spiritual, psychological, and cosmic dimensions (Mwaura, 2001). It is associated with all that is positively valued in life. Conversely, sickness is understood as arising from disharmony in these dimensions. Afflictions—whether personal or communal—symbolize a breakdown, interruption, or distortion of the normal relationship between humans and spiritual beings. Stated differently, sickness represents a state of disorder in which the body and environment are misaligned, leaving the individual vulnerable to misfortune. As Tsala Tsala (1997) observes, every disease is systematically acknowledged as having a supernatural origin—whether the grief of ancestors, the actions of divinities, sorcery, or evil spells.

From this perspective, biology alone does not explain disease causation. Illness is regarded as a social phenomenon that has implications not only for the individual but also for the entire community. Furthermore, Africans believe that diseases can be transmitted across generations if the moral or spiritual fault that caused them is not resolved.

Healing, therefore, becomes a central religious practice. African cosmology, which is “*world-affirming*,” insists that life must be safeguarded from obstacles, ill health, and misfortune that threaten the fulfillment of life’s goals (Onunwa, 1991:269). The diviner thus becomes a key specialist, as he or she is believed capable of diagnosing the causes of disease, misfortune, or any obstacle to personal or communal well-being.

Diviners generally fall into two categories:

1. Diagnosticians – those who identify the spiritual causes of affliction.
2. Theraputists – those who interpret the causes and prescribe remedies, often combining spiritual guidance with herbal or ritual treatments.

In practice, the roles of diviner and healer often overlap, since diagnosing and treating ailments are interwoven.

Onunwa (1991) notes that healing is part of the broader religious effort to restore harmony between the physical and spiritual realms. To achieve this, a diviner-healer may prepare medicines from herbs mixed with ritual objects, or remove harmful spiritual elements believed to have been implanted by witchcraft. Such acts are not regarded as trickery but as real interventions, accepted by both the healer and the community.

In addition, diviners may provide protective charms or amulets believed to carry magical properties, instilling confidence and offering protection to those who use them. Healing in African society thus involves both curative and protective measures, underscoring the conviction that diviners and their powers are real and effective.

Continuity of Divination in Contemporary Africa

Despite the forces of modernization, urbanization, and the spread of Western medicine, divination continues to flourish in many parts of Africa. This continuity underscores its deep roots in African cosmology and its ability to adapt to changing contexts. While modern education and Christianity have introduced alternative frameworks of meaning, divination remains relevant because it addresses questions that science and biomedicine often leave unanswered—questions of causation, meaning, and moral responsibility.

Many Africans continue to consult diviners during crises such as illness, family conflict, infertility, or misfortune. Even among the educated elite, divination is not considered a relic of the past but a practical resource. Politicians, business leaders, and professionals frequently seek diviners’ guidance for decision-making, protection, and success. This

resilience demonstrates that divination is not simply about healing the body but about restoring harmony within the individual, family, and community.

Moreover, divination has shown remarkable adaptability. New forms have emerged in urban centres, where diviners incorporate Christian language, Islamic practices, or even modern technology into their work. The rise of “phone divination” and online consultations illustrates how traditional practices evolve while maintaining their essential functions.

In short, the persistence of divination highlights the adaptability of African worldviews. While modernization alters its forms, the core principles of seeking meaning, identifying causation, and fostering communal healing remain intact.

CONCLUSION

Divination and healing occupy a central place in African traditional culture. They are not merely practices for diagnosing and curing illness but holistic systems that seek to restore harmony between individuals, communities, and the spiritual world. Health is understood as a state of total well-being—physical, social, psychological, and spiritual—while sickness is seen as a disruption of this balance.

The persistence of divination in contemporary Africa demonstrates both the resilience and adaptability of African worldviews. Even in the face of modernization, urbanization, and scientific medicine, divination remains relevant because it addresses fundamental human concerns: the search for meaning, the identification of causation, and the restoration of communal well-being. Its ability to incorporate new methods—ranging from book divination to the use of modern technologies—illustrates its dynamism and continued importance.

Ultimately, divination and healing in African culture affirm life by protecting it against misfortune, resolving conflict, and restoring order where disharmony prevails. Far from being outdated, these practices reveal a sophisticated understanding of human existence in which the spiritual, social, and physical dimensions of life are inseparably linked.

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