

AFA DIVINATION IN ANLO:  
A Preliminary Report<sup>1</sup>

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The importance of geomancy in West Africa is well known. Its principal exponents include the Yoruba, Dahomey and the Ewe. Although the Yoruba are generally credited with its origin, some Ilorin Yoruba accounts quoted by Clarke suggest that it was learned from the Nupe.<sup>2</sup> Similar practices are also found among the Anago Yoruba of Brazil and Cubans of Yoruba descent. Whatever its origin, afa divination, as it is called among the Ewe, has become integrated in diverse ways into the religious systems of all the societies which now practise it. The only traces of Yoruba origin in the non-Yoruba areas now are probably the unintelligible Yoruba language employed in the process and the verses the diviners recite which are all based at Ife, the traditional ritual centre of the Yoruba.

While much has been written about the Yoruba and the Dahomean systems notably by Bascom and Herskovits respectively, very little has been done on the Ewe side. In this paper an attempt will be made to describe the technical procedures and other salient features in the Ewe practice.

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2. Clarke, 1939, p.238.

The home of the Ewe-speaking peoples now lies in south-eastern Ghana and the southern half of Togo. But they have not been living here for more than five centuries. They have a history of migration which puts their origin somewhere in Yoruba country around the present Dahomey-Nigeria border.

Before coming under European rule at the end of the last century, the Ewe never lived under one political authority. They were organised into a number of chiefdoms varying in size from a few villages to large and powerful kingdoms like Anlo and Peki comprising several towns and villages. Despite the absence of political unity the Ewe share among others a common myth of origin and history of migration; a common Ewe language spoken throughout Eweland; and finally the consciousness of being one people.

The Ewe area described here is the Kingdom of Anlo, which lies in the extreme southeastern corner of Ghana, immediately east of the Volta River, with an area of 883 square miles and a population of 231,017 in 1960.<sup>1</sup> It is a low country whose landscape and economy are dominated principally by the large Keta Lagoon (which covers about a third of the area and separates the littoral from the hinterland) and also by the numerous streams that connect the Lagoon with the Volta River. During the main rainy season which centres around June, large areas around the lagoon are flooded for months while in the dry season, November to January, the floods recede and the greater part of the lagoon itself dries up, yielding large incrustations of salt which provide an important article of trade.

On the sea coast and in the villages surrounding the lagoon, fishing is the chief occupation but inland to the north the people cultivate cassava, corn and vegetables. Other occupations include cloth weaving on hand looms, basket making and poultry farming.

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1. 1960 Population Census of Ghana, Vol. 1. The Gazetteer, Census Office, Accra, 1962, P. XXIII.

Like the other Ewe groups the Anlo are patrilineal. There are fifteen agamous, dispersed, totemic clans whose local segments form exogamous lineages. Two of the clans have royal dynasties from whom the Awoamefia or King is alternately chosen.

There is a belief in a High God, Mawu, who like many other such West African gods disappeared after creating the world because of the frequent demands on him by his people while he lived near them. There is no organised worship for him: no priesthood, shrine nor church. He is invoked by individuals in everyday life and in times of crises. It is according to the Ewe themselves a god of the thoughtful, not of the multitude. Next to Mawu are the small gods or trɔwo (singular, trɔ) which are his creations, deriving their powers from him and residing in nature objects like streams, ponds, lagoons and forests. Unlike the High God the trɔwo have organised worship with shrines, priests and churches.

There are also a number of cults or voduwo owned by certain individuals. Many Anlo voduwo are of foreign origin, mainly Dahomean and Togolese and the individual desirous of establishing them travels to their places of origin where the necessary fees are paid and the rites performed. Membership of both trɔ and vodu (singular) cuts across lineage and clan lines, though children usually join the gods served by their parents.

But by far the most important supernatural beings are the ancestral spirits toɔbɛɔliawo, worshipped in a body by lineages and clans at festivals and also by individuals who normally show their reverence by giving them the first morsel of food or the first drops of water or drinks before satisfying themselves. Individuals may also ask specific favours from their ancestors through the leaders of their descent groups.

Afa, the deity worshipped by afa diviners, bokowo (sing. bokɔ) has a somewhat ambiguous position in Anlo

religious system. It is popularly regarded as vodu rather than trɔ̃. It appears diviners themselves also regard it as such at least by implication as evidenced in their greetings when the state of the "vodu" (meaning the afa deity) is asked. But afa differs from vodu in some important respects. Unlike vodu it is not a possession cult, and its intentions and wishes are revealed through sickness and divination. Besides it is through afa that the wishes of all the other gods and supernatural beings are revealed. Also each practising bokɔ can both find out and procure a cure for sickness and misfortune whereas in both trɔ̃ and vodu these functions are the prerogatives of the priests. Because of these reasons and the highly specialised nature of the divination coupled with the considerable respect accorded them, diviners prefer to keep afa quite apart from both vodu and trɔ̃.

All the supernatural beings just enumerated including afa are capable of sending death, sickness and other misfortunes on their worshippers if neglected or offended in any way. On the other hand their powers can be neutralized by witches and sorcerers who may harm anyone regardless of his devotion to Mawu, trɔ̃, vodu, the ancestors or afa.

The Anlo themselves generally attribute death<sup>1</sup> to these supernatural forces as well as to witchcraft and sorcery, rarely to natural causes. Therefore soon after funeral ceremonies are completed the relations of the deceased approach a diviner to find out which of these forces has caused death. Almost invariably one or more of them will be mentioned, which is just the answer the relatives themselves expect. It is only in the case of a very old man that it is said Mawu

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1. Life expectancy in Anlo is not great due probably to malnutrition and widespread alcoholism. On a rough estimate it averages about forty-five to fifty years for those who do not die in early childhood whilst almost every mother before the completion of her reproductive activities experiences either a still birth or the death of an infant. Moreover in the fishing areas, drowning and other accidents with this occupation are quite common.

has called him, the equivalent of a natural death.

Yet finding the cause of death is only one of the bokə's many functions which may be grouped under the following headings:

- (a) To warn individuals and groups of impending misfortunes and to prescribe remedies for prevention.
- (b) To advise individuals and groups about possible actions which may affect prosperity or health.
- (c) To give explanations for misfortunes which have already occurred, such as famine, death or sickness.
- (d) To find which ancestor is reincarnated in a child.

The following is a sample of cases witnessed one day in a diviner's house:-

- 1. A woman was to undergo a surgical operation and wanted to know whether it would be successful.
- 2. A man brought a sick daughter to find out what was troubling her. He said treatment received at the government health centre failed to cure her.
- 3. A man who said he had been having bad dreams came to know the cause.
- 4. A woman whose prosperous business collapsed suddenly came to know why and to remedy the situation.

To this list may be added a footnote that in Anlo a large section of the population has still not acquired any confidence in European trained medical doctors and the hospitals. It is still commonplace for the sick to approach diviners for diagnosis and cure. In such

an environment the importance of the diviner is considerable.

In all these cases the bokó uses a complex system of geomancy of which there are two methods in current use. In one a rectangular wooden board is used. After a light greyish powder has been sprinkled on it, the diviner shuffles sixteen palm nuts by rapidly passing them from one hand to the other, his aim being to have one or two nuts in one hand and the rest in the other hand. This however is not always possible after every shuffling. In any case if two nuts are left in one hand he marks one stroke, if one nut he marks two strokes in the powder on the board. If none or more than two nuts are left in one hand after the manipulation then this is not ominous and the process is repeated till only one or two nuts are left at a time. The process is completed when eight ominous results are obtained, marked on the board in two vertical columns of four groups of single or double strokes such as shown in the diagram below. This combination of strokes determines the client's du, message, or kpóli, destiny, which are used interchangeably. This method is so complex and lengthy that it takes several minutes to obtain the required ominous signs or strokes and is consequently not employed in ordinary cases of consultation.

In the less complex one the diviner uses gumaga, an instrument made of eight half-pods of the rare huku seed strung at equal intervals on a cord about twenty inches in length. To cast the gumaga the diviner holds the middle of the cord to enable the seed to present two columns of four groups on the mat. Each of the half pods has concave and convex surfaces so that when the gumaga is thrown on the mat or floor the pattern presented by the surfaces determines the kpóli or du.

Two important actions, performed simultaneously, precede both processes of divination. The first is a prayer in somewhat unintelligible Yoruba and Ewe lasting about eight minutes in which the names of some famous diviners are invoked and an appeal made

to the afa deity to assist in revealing the truth. While the prayer is being recited the diviner shuffles continuously an innumerable amount of articles which he has emptied on the floor from his diving bag.<sup>1</sup> Before these actions the client is expected to whisper his troubles on a coin which is then placed on the mat, for, proper procedure demands that the client's intention for coming to afa be kept secret from the diviner before the kpoli is revealed.

There are sixteen possible principal kpoliwo (pl.) resulting from the diagram of strokes each of which may be applicable at a time. They are arranged according to seniority as:

(1) DZONGBE	(2) YEKU-MEDZI	(3) WOLI-MEDZI	(4) DI-MEDZI
1 1	11 11	11 11	1 1
1 1	11 11	1 1	11 11
1 1	11 11	1 1	11 11
1 1	11 11	11 11	1 1
(5) LOSO-MEDZI	(6) DI-MEDZI	(7) ABLA-MEDZI	(8) AKLA-MEDZI
1 1	11 11	1 1	11 11
1 1	11 11	11 11	11 11
11 11	1 1	11 11	11 11
11 11	1 1	11 11	1 1
(9) GUDA-MEDZI	(10) SA-MEDZI	(11) KA-MEDZI	(12) TRUKPE-MEDZI
1 1	11 11	11 11	11 11
1 1	1 1	1 1	11 11
1 1	1 1	11 11	1 1
11 11	1 1	11 11	11 11

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1. The contents of a divining bag include almost everything the diviner can lay hands on and may number nearly a thousand articles. Important items are cowrie shells, coins, palm nuts, beads, skulls of small animals all of which are used in the process of vodzibabla described below.

(13) TULA-MEDZI	(14) LETE-MEDZI	(15) TSYE-MEDZI	(16) FU-MEDZI <sup>(1)</sup>
1 1	1 1	1 1	11 11
11 11	1 1	11 11	1 1
1 1	11 11	1 1	11 11
1 1	1 1	11 11	1 1

It will be seen that all but one of the sixteen principal kpɔliwo have the suffix medzi (which means two in Yoruba) because in each case the number and order of the strokes in both columns are identical. In other words each of the sixteen kpɔliwo is a combination of two identical columns. No clear explanation has been given for the absence of the suffix in the case of Dzonbe. Informants only said that strictly speaking it is also a medzi but as the chief of all the kpɔliwo it is not necessary to repeat its identical combination.

Each of the sixteen principal kpɔliwo can be combined with others to form various permutations of ordinary kpɔliwo. That is, one column of kpɔli Dzonbe for instance can be combined with one side of any of the other fifteen kpɔliwo and vice versa to form other kpɔliwo. Thus we may have for example kpɔli loso - guda which is a combination of kpɔli loso and kpɔli guda. Such a kpɔli will be represented in terms of strokes

as:-

1	1
1	1
1	11
11	11

It will be seen that in the strokes for loso-guda the strokes for loso are on the right and guda on the left. This is because in every combination the diviner reads from right to left. That is, if loso were on the left and guda on the right we shall have a different kpɔli altogether which will be known

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1. This order of the figures corresponds exactly to Bascom's for the Yoruba but differs slightly from both Herskovits for the Dahomey, and Fiawoo's obtained from the same Ewe area. See Bascom 1966, p.428, Herskovits, 1938, Vol. II, p.210 and Fiawoo, 1958, p.69.



as guda - loso represented in strokes as:-


In this way we have at least 256 different kpɔ̀liwo being combinations of the sixteen major kpɔ̀liwo with each other. But the ordinary kpɔ̀liwo have not the suffix medzi because their columns have no identical number or order of strokes.

Each principal and ordinary kpɔ̀li has proverbs, verses, pithy sayings and a number of anecdotes cast in a vague way to explain it. These proverbs, verses etc., cover a number of contingencies such as death, sickness, wealth or marriage. The anecdotes as the diviner always emphasises all come from Yoruba mythology centred at Ile Ife, the cradle of all Yoruba and indeed of all men, according to the Yoruba. Thus the diviner introduces his narration by the phrase, "Le efe mea .." That is, "In Ife of old ...". There are also a number of taboos usually of food associated with the articles in the verses and anecdotes.

The determination of the kpɔ̀li and its anecdotes, proverbs, etc., is only a first step in the process of Afa geomancy. It is further necessary to know whether the kpɔ̀li carries a good or bad omen for the client. This is determined by vodzibabla. The diviner gives a nut and a coin or cowrie to the client to hold in his hands separately and at random. By throwing the gumaga two times he is able to determine which of the articles is ominous. The nut carries bad omen while the coin and the cowrie shell, a good omen. A bad omen means that disaster is likely to follow if sacrifice is not made to offset the impending danger while a good omen on the other hand portends good fortune but only if validated by sacrifice. Sacrifice accompanies every completed process of afa divination whether the

omen is good or not. The type of sacrifice to be performed in each case is determined by the kpali, the nature of the omen, the relevant verses and the interpretations of the diviner. Should a client fail to perform sacrifice because he feels the omens are good he will face misfortune instead. Kamasa, or divination without sacrificing and its consequences are some of the reasons which keep some people away from diviners, for sacrifices as will be shown later are sometimes very expensive and one will not know before consulting a diviner whether or not an expensive sacrifice will be demanded.

It has been shown that the anecdotes are cast in vague terms which reveal or forecast very little. Precision and detail may be obtained by further throwing of the gumaga or manipulation of the nuts which may also involve further vodzibabla. Leading questions are asked and the client may even be asked to say something about his life history and experiences. For example, kpali Fumedzi is related to pregnancy. If this is revealed the first question put to a female client of child bearing age is, "Are you pregnant?" If the answer is no she may be asked whether any of her close relatives is pregnant. If the answer is again in the negative, the diviner will then say the client will soon conceive. If the omens are good sacrifice should be performed to confirm the safe delivery the kpali portents. If they are bad the pregnancy will bring misfortune unless sacrifice for Fumedzi is performed. A male client on Fumedzi also faces similar questions about his wife or female relatives.

As far as this stage of the procedure is concerned there appears to be some difference between the Anlo and other exponents of the system. While among the Yoruba it is the client who selects the suitable verse among the list of verses narrated by the diviner,<sup>1</sup> the Ewe baka after narrating the stories of the client's kpali selects what he considers to be the most appropriate for his client. He is

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1. Bascom, op. cit. p.43.

guided in his choice by such considerations as the complexion of his client, his weight, build and other physical traits as well as other facts he is able to solicit from him. In this respect the Anlo practice conforms substantially to that of the Dahomey where "complete frankness" between the diviner and his client is demanded,<sup>1</sup> the only difference being that the Anlo client does not reveal the nature of his problem to the bokɔ before the casting of the gumaga and the determination of the kpɔli as is the case in Dahomey.

Afa is both a deity and a system of divination. Actually it is the deity of the system of divination that bears its name. However not all its servants are diviners. Although both male and female may serve it, only male servants may be diviners and some of the latter too do not practise it either because their economic activities do not allow them or because they lack the skill for it.

To become a diviner one has to undergo an apprenticeship lasting at least three months after initiation. This period may be extended to nearly three years if the novice is slow in mastering the techniques. During the period of apprenticeship the novice remains in his master's novitiate till he is ritually outdoored. The apprenticeship which may cost about £100 in cash and goods involves memorizing all the figures and their verses, pithy sayings, proverbs and anecdotes as well as their accompanying sacrifices and herbs. The technique of making a gumaga is also learned, for every practising bokɔ must make his own gumaga.

Training in afa technique is compulsory for every male servant regardless of his prospective occupation. Although very successful diviners live solely on income from divination, it is usually not a full time business and may be combined with other economic activities.

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1. Herskovits, op.cit. p.216.

Afa diviners are organised into four sects: anago, dzisa, mayehoe or zevi and atsyake. The anago differ from the others in certain respects. While they are forbidden to indulge in any form of sorcery or magic, the others are closely connected with these practices. And in the casting of the gumaga the anago throw it with the middle handle falling towards the client whilst the others throw it in the opposite direction, that is with the handle falling towards the diviner. The reading in both cases is however the same, from top to bottom and right to left. But despite their differences the four sects cooperate in many ways such as dancing and drumming and holding of common initiation activities.

The principal officers<sup>1</sup> for the sects are:-

<u>Anago</u>	<u>Dzisa (Mayehoe, Atsyake)</u>
1. Baba (Oluawo)	1. Oluawo
2. Dzogbana	2. Dzogbana
3. Aq̄aba	3. Aq̄aba
4. Selikpawo	4. Selikpawo
5. Ordinary diviners	5. Ordinary diviners

The Baba or Oluawo is the figure head but the Dzogbana is the most important leader. It is like having a society in which the secretary's powers carry greater weight than the president's. In this case the secretary will be the Dzogbana and the president, the Baba or Oluawo. The Aq̄aba assists the Dzogbana while the Selikpawo serves as a messenger, a position which carries great influence among diviners.

1. Some of these titles are also found among the Yoruba. Clarke gives the following hierarchy of babalawo (diviners) without giving their functions:

1. Oluawo
2. Akoda
3. Aseda
4. Araba
5. Ordinary babalawo.

It has already been mentioned how afa has become an Anlo institution, and integrated into the traditional religious system. Today very few Anlo apart from the bokowo know or claim that it originated from Yorubaland. Among that section of the population which consults the diviners, belief in the efficacy of the system is almost complete. The ordinary Anlo traditional believer has nothing to complain about it even when a number of the predictions and sacrifices fail to materialise. According to their belief, the supernatural forces of afa control all the elements of the procedure which others may ascribe to chance. The prayers preceding the divination, the bokɔ claims and the client believes, help to solicit supernatural participation in the process. It is further believed by both diviner and client that the former's initiation into the afa cult and the training he has acquired all help to put him in a special ritual condition, a relationship with the sacred, which helps him divine with supernatural sanction. Another source of confidence for the client derives from the anecdotes, verses, proverbs and the sayings which explain the figures. Without exception they refer to legendary characters who approached Afa with similar problems as the client, sacrificed the things the diviner now demands for sacrifice, and prospered, the belief being that since that legendary character succeeded by sacrificing the very things now mentioned, the present client will also succeed by following suit. This corresponds very closely to Frazer's Law of similarity which, despite Bascom's statements on the Yoruba to the contrary, finds expression in many afa sacrifices in Anlo. Two specific examples will suffice. A barren woman on Fu-medzi was asked to make, among others, an image of a baby, carry it on her back in the way babies are carried by mothers and then leave it under any tree in a flowering state. Also a client who was standing for an election was asked to trample his opponent's mud image under his feet. The implication for the law of similarity in these actions is clear. By

imitating a mother and coming into contact with a fertile tree the client will also achieve fertility and eventually become a mother. The second client also, according to this belief, will defeat his opponent after beating him in the sacrifice.

To return to the question of confidence in diviners, their general behaviour may also be mentioned. Both as individuals and as a group their deportment is expected to be above suspicion and as they themselves always emphasize, their professional white attire which distinguishes them from others is meant to reflect their moral purity. There are also a number of taboos which govern their behaviour such as those forbidding them to quarrel in public and to commit adultery. Moreover the knowledge displayed in memorizing hundreds of verses, anecdotes and proverbs commends them very highly to the ordinary Anlo as men of high intellectual standing. It has been suggested for instance that the amount of energy, time and knowledge that goes to qualify a person as diviner may be equivalent to if not greater than what one requires for a Ph.D.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the merits of this claim, the respect for these men in a folk society must be considerable.

It must be mentioned once again that though their predictions do not always come true, as found in many other systems of divination, failures do not result in any doubt about the competence or efficiency of either the diviner or the system as such. Explanations and alibis including incorrect procedures and the unhallowed condition of the client, are always provided to cover all short-comings. Besides, a client who feels he followed all the instructions of the diviner and still failed to get the desired result cannot be sure that nothing has been achieved or that the advice of the diviner was wrong. In the absence of controlled conditions he cannot be certain that if he had refused to take the

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1. Ottenberg and Ottenberg, p.65.

diviner's advice, things would not have been worse.

These then are some of the considerations which enthrone confidence in clients. To the outside observer and the non-believer however the patterns presented by the gumaga and the number of nuts remaining in one hand at a time during divination are due to mere chance. "How could the throwing of nuts reveal the unknown?" To these people therefore belief in such a system stems from either superstition or the uncritical minds of clients and the members of the society at large. Today it is also the widespread belief among many, especially Christians, that diviners are frauds who use all sorts of trickery to cheat their clients. In this regard reference is frequently made to the many failures diviners encounter, while obvious successes are explained in terms of chance and coincidence. It is quite true that despite their professional codes of conduct, unscrupulous diviners sometimes exist whose behaviour is very suspicious and who can therefore lend themselves very easily to charges of fraud. Equally true is the fact that even among the usually respectable diviners doubts sometimes arise about the interpretation of the figures as well as the predictions and the prescribed remedies. These weaknesses however do not affect the majority of them who are in general sincere individuals having fervent belief in their procedures and profession. Few if any will always go out to cheat their clients.

Yet there can be very little cheating unless the procedures of the system itself makes this possible. Unfortunately afa is not altogether proof against fraud. Bascom mentions a number of instances when this can be done among the Yoruba<sup>1</sup> some of which apply to the Anlo too. Let's take first the throwing of the gumaga. Perhaps this is the only stage where cheating is not easy. The casting of the chain is done in such a way that the diviner cannot influence its fall and the figures. It has also been noticed among the Anlo (as Bascom did among

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1. Op. cit. p.50.

the Yoruba) that in some gumaga<sup>1</sup> the seeds are joined by rather inflexible cords which enable certain figures to show more frequently than others. This is no cheating as such. The weakness here derives simply from the diviner's inability to make a good gumaga for himself. Moreover as an informant claimed, even in an inflexible cord afa will influence the fall!

It is easier to control the figures derived from shuffling the palm nuts since only the diviner can determine when it is time to stop and check the number of nuts remaining in each hand. Thus a diviner intent on cheating could continue shuffling until the desired number of nuts remains in one hand, repeating this trick through the whole process. Yet it has been found from experience and close observation that only a very clever diviner can dishonestly manipulate the nuts without incurring the suspicion of his client. In any case this method is never used in ordinary divination but only on special occasions when cheating will not benefit the diviner in any way.

It is when reciting the verses that the diviner can easily falsify by simply inventing verses to suit the client's circumstances if he surmises them. Perhaps the only safeguard against this is the fear that the suspicious client may ask another diviner to re-interpret the figures for him.

Sacrifice is another vulnerable aspect. Although the sacrifice for the various kpoliwo is determined by the applicable verse, there is no fixed number or quantity of sacrificial objects in each case. Undoubtedly this gives the best opportunity to the diviner to cheat if he wishes to. According to informants afa sacrifice is flexible enough to meet the pockets of every client. It is claimed that if the kpoli demands sheep for sacrifice the diviner can ask a poor client to buy a piece of mutton from a

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1. Ibid.



butcher instead of slaughtering a whole sheep. Yet few diviners are considerate enough to allow this. This is understandable in view of the fact that the destination of all sacrificial objects after necessary rites are performed, is the diviner's pot and kitchen.

In his study among the Yoruba, Clarke suggests that the diviner uses telepathy through which he knows consciously or unconsciously what the enquirer has whispered <sup>k</sup> on the coin. Since this fieldwork was limited to the Ewe area there is no direct evidence to controvert the position of someone who studied among the Yoruba. As far as the Ewe are concerned, telepathy as an integral part of afa divination is totally ruled out, and for what is known of the Yoruba system both from the literature and from observation of Yoruba babalawo in Ghana, it can only be said that most of its procedures do not differ significantly from the Ewe system. A more persuasive explanation may be empathy the acceptance of which, however, like telepathy, would render all the complex processes involved unnecessary, for it would mean that the figures and the verses are only used to bamboozle the client, a contention no one who has closely studied the systems in action will accept. On the other hand only a belief in the efficacy of the afa deity can change what is overtly a chance operation into a veritable method of knowing the unknown.

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1. Op. cit. p.251.

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