



DIVINATION

Binding Spirit and Matter through Divination

ABSTRACT

Smith, Karen
(k.smith579@canterbury.ac.uk)
MA Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred

Considering the question of why divination appears to be a taboo topic for educated modern thought, it strikes me that, if indeed divination is a taboo topic (and I agree that it is), it is better than being a trivialized, or dismissed topic -although perhaps both reactions are generated from the same place. The term “taboo” comes from the Tongan *tapu* or Fijian *tabu* -“prohibited”, “disallowed”, “forbidden”. According to Wikipedia, taboo is, “A vehement prohibition of an action based on the belief that such behavior is either too sacred or too accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake.” Taboo then suggests power, an energy at work which has the potential for transformation, positive or negative, and as such is not to be undertaken lightly. Could it be that ridicule and taboo are two sides of the same coin born of an attitude of fear? And if so why is divination, the practice of seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means, fearful to educated modern thought? I intend to explore these questions in this essay, presenting a case that divination is challenging for educated modern thought because, as a practice, it integrates the material world and the spirit world.

In my essay I will attempt to show how authentic mystical experience is not possible within a dualistic paradigm that separates mind from body, spirit from matter, and experience from knowledge. Through a process of considering some of the wider implications of my argument, I will present my conclusion - that the material world is the crucible through which life and spirit flow and that in separating spirit from matter, the potential for the sacred is reduced. My premise is that divination is taboo precisely because it is powerful and if taken seriously has the capacity to expose the short-comings of the rational mind which seeks to strip things down to their component parts, thereby prohibiting the sacredness, power and mystery of the whole.

Within the Western academy, study of divination has been largely contained within the disciplines of anthropology and religious studies (not without much in-house debate and opposing factions). Classical scholars such as Lucien Levy- Bruhl and E.E. Evans Pritchard provided key-stone thinking in mapping the peculiarities of the ‘primitive’ mind. While these forefathers of anthropology had first-hand exposure to the cultures they studied, there is no escaping that they were rooted in their own cultural conditioning, raising the question, to what extent were they able to stand outside of rational paradigm to which they belonged?

The question of cultural relativism aside, they were undoubtedly greatly influential to future studies not only in anthropology but also religious studies and psychology. While delivering a talk on *Rationalism and Religion*, the Classical scholar Jane Ellen Harrison proclaimed that “The psychological worm has turned”, and that scholars such as Marcel Mauss, MM Durkheim and Levy-Bruhl had:

Turned and told us the plain truth - that natural religion is emotional rather than intellectual in origin, is based not on mistaken theory, but on certain individual and especially social reactions. That the province of religion is, in a word not truth or falsehood, not mistaken ideals, but values. (Harrison, 1919, p.15).

The scholars of the time, Harrison, et al were informed by these great minds that, “religion is an emotional state and not an intellectual error” (ibid). Harrison goes on to say how thankful she is to psychology:

We rationalist owe psychology a very real debt, it has freed us... It has taught us that religion is not a system of dead intellectual errors, but of living emotions; it counts among the motor forces of life today, and it will count tomorrow.” (Harrison, 1919, p.15).

Harrison’s comments are interesting not least because they convey a turning of the tide from the detachment of rationalism to a more humanist approach, but also because her observations point to the transition of the divine from an external phenomenon to an emotional experience within the life of the individual.

A few years earlier in 1913, Freud published *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, a study in which the founding-father of psychoanalysis draws parallels between the primitive and the neurotic and reduces certain magical experiences to mere projections of the inner mental life. In his study he concluded that the practices of animism are merely a cover up of instinctual repression. While the scholarly minds of the time conceded to divinity as possessing an emotion quality, once the gods were safely contained within the human psyche, they could be dissected and rationalized through enlightened reason.

Here I would like to include an overview of the integral philosopher Ken Wilber’s pre/trans rational fallacy although my comprehension of his thesis is limited excepting that broadly Wilber places rationalism on a spectrum (lower stages and higher stages) from pre to trans-rational states of consciousness. He hypothesizes that these states

came to be confused and misinterpreted in the translation from pre to post-modern thinking. He determined that a major fault-line in considering this phenomenon is evidenced in the distinctive attitudes of the two forefather of psychoanalysis, Freud and Jung, the former reducing spiritual states to infantile complexes (as illustrated in *Totem and Taboo*), while the latter elevates “pre-rational mythology to trans-rational glory”. In short, Freud was largely dismissive of the mystical experience whereas Jung elevated it. While I do not intend to continue further with this theory, it is useful in considering, as I do later in my essay, the assignment of the gods to either the celestial or psychological realms, both states I believe denying the integration of spirit and matter, which is the main premise of my essay.

While it seems that the gods are banished from the human body and the material world, they have comfortably taken up residence within the psyche of but as Jung warns, even when these powers are rationalized, suppressed or pathologized, they still make their presence felt.

Contemporary man...is possessed by “powers” that are beyond his control. His gods and demons have not disappeared at all, they have merely got new names. They keep him on the run with restlessness, vague apprehensions, psychological complications, and an insatiable need for pills, alcohol, tobacco, food – and above all, a large array of neurosis. (Jung, 1964, p.82)

Whenever behaviour that may be considered ‘aberrant’ is contained or rationalized, it also becomes neutralized and manageable – less threatening. Experiences that do not easily sit within a paradigm of logic can reassuringly be explained as a neurosis or a complex of the individual who can then be managed appropriately. The obvious problem here is a reinforcement of a dualistic and separatist ethos that dislocates the individual from his or her wider environment. That is to say, to the rational mind, a human being may experience himself as something other than the culture to which he belongs. In this case, the problem, or the condition is assigned solely to the individual and the society to which he belongs is pardoned from responsibility. There are a profusion of labels to define and explain such conditions however what is rare in rational thinking is the possibility of an authentic divinised experience which cannot be identified in pre-determined structures such as psychology or religion.

Demoting the gods to the subconscious is an attempt to constrict powers that cannot be resolved by the principles of the rational mind. James Hillman advocates a “polytheistic

psychology” in which the archetypes are treated as utterly real people but, as Naydlar says, “Like so many Jungians and post Jungians, he draws back from following these psychic energies through to their trans-psychic source.” (Naydler 2009, p.105). It seems then that the gods must be fully ensconced within the celestial realms, or else harbored safely in the interior realms of the human psyche; on no account must they be able to travel freely interacting with the physical world and defying verifiable laws of physics.

Historian and Anthropologist, Jean-Pierre Vernant advises that, “We must seek to describe not only the sociological parameters of divination, but just as importantly ‘divinatory intelligence’, the distinctive intellectual process involved.” (Vernant quoted in Cornelius, 2010, p.119). While I agree this is so, I propose that we must also consider biological intelligence, the physical or ‘bio-mystical’ processes involved in the practice of divination. Therein lies the heart of my thesis – I suggest that the reason divination is a taboo topic for the educated mind is precisely because to have at least an awareness of the forces at work, one must take into consideration the material world, and integrating spirit and matter appears to be problematic for the educated mind.

In a hegemony of dualism, the body/mind split creates a major fissure in its academic and religious institutions. Dualism insists on separation, on stripping things down to their component parts in an attempt to understand how they work. When things are separated they are assigned value in and of themselves rather than viewed as an essential part of the whole where they are bigger than the sum of their part. This mechanized thinking is reductivist and attempts to place things in an order of significance and value, i.e. one thing is better than the other and so on.

A structure of hierarchy paves the way for a system of control or ‘power over’ - the more value something has the better placed it is to assume authority. Where dualistic thinking runs into problems is the attempt to hold two seemingly distinct components equally. Dualism sets things against each other rather than fitting things together in a condition of harmony and unity. Thus, and/ or thinking rather than both/and is the corollary of dualism, and this is nowhere so apparent in the fracture between thinking and feeling; the sacred is an emotional experience, divination is an emotional experience. Without a reconciliation of these states, human experience and especially spiritual human experience is necessarily limited but as and Jung says, “Where wisdom reigns there is no conflict”. (Jung, C. 1970, p.226).

In relocating the gods from an objective numinous realm to the interior of the human soul, spirit is still prohibited from the material world. Rather than contain the sacred exclusively within the psyche, or else in an intangible heaven, is there a possibility that gods may be located in the both? The social philosopher and cultural critic, William Irwin Thompson remind us that, "The Latin root for the word "religion" is *religare* which means a bond; a binding back to something.' (Irwin quoted in Sjo and Mor, 1991, p235). Binding is a good metaphor for resolving opposites- binding together the inner and the outer, the temporal and the non-temporal, the sacred and profane. Binding is an experience that does not take place in the psyche alone but includes an inclusion of the body (becoming embodied), and a binding to all other living beings (including the earth), in the web of life.

In *Research as Resistance*, Leslie Brown and Susan Strega say,

The existence of non-Western, non-Euro-centric world views that are not founded on hierarchical dualism, which posit that both existence and knowledge are contingent on each other, and/or on the world and other living entities have important implications for researchers, [and that] by using an example of indigenous wisdom which defines the basis of knowledge as connection, everything and everyone in the world is connected, and understanding these connections is the beginning of knowledge. (Brown & Strega, 2015, p. 201).

While there is always a danger of romanticising the primitive experience, we can learn a great deal from indigenous people who make no distinction between inner and outer, self and other, matter and spirit, etc. The pre-modern experience appeared to be relatively free of polarized thinking, and therefore does not separate experience for knowledge; "The sacred *is* the emotional force which connects the part to the whole." (Thompson, W, 1981, p.102). Though the passing of time, untold technological 'advancement', and increasingly complex social structure, the human experience has undoubtedly changed and yet I suspect we retain an archaic resonance that transcends cultural conditioning.

Although out with the parameters of this essay, I would argue that this primitive mind is stored in our physical cells and the cells of the material world just as much as in our minds. To what extent then, are we a product of our social conditioning, and what, if anything exists beyond that? Surely the sacredness of life, and of human life is a mystery beyond mental reasoning. Thompson tells us that "The secular, or the profane is that which has been broken off from, or has fallen from its emotional bond to the universe."

(*ibid*, 1981). It would appear that the path-ways to reconnect with the sacred are emotional, feeling receptors opening us to the sensory world and our physical experience.

Emotions (energy in motion) are the gateway to our feelings which connect us with all other living things and the life force of the universe through which we may be transformed. Divination is a power to be reckoned with for, when a person is connected with the primordial intelligences of life, he is no longer enclosed within the prison of the mind. It is difficult to influence such a person with empty, inorganic experiences devoid of vitality and life-force. In his book, *The Future of the Ancient World*, Jeremy Naydler tells us that, "For the divinatory consciousness of antiquity, nature was still permeated, or at the very least permeable, by the spirit world." (Naydler, J. 2009, p.151). He continues to say that, "Behind the practice of divination there was an assumption that certain physical phenomena are, or can become, linked to the world of the gods and the spirits." (*ibid*, p.151).

The extent to which a person is ratified by his culture and societal codes determine the permeability (or lack of) to influences beyond the construct of his mental world. Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor propose that "Ecstasy is the dance of the individual with the All" and inform us that "Ek-stasis", means standing outside "oneself", and so cancelling out the conditioned mind" (Sjöo & Mor, 1987, p.52). I suggest that access to wisdom beyond human reason may be more readily accessed if one is able to stand outside of their conditioning (or at least have the ability to withstand the paradoxes of life). When the human mind becomes too rigid and inorganic, detached from the living world and its primordial forces, a kind of calcification happens that makes us less receptive to the wisdom of the natural world. This stultifies the human experience, for it is through the natural forces we are bound to the web of life.

This view however may be contentious to the educated mind because in connecting with 'the whole', in taking his place in the matrix of life, human beings are less dependent on society for emotional sustenance and belonging; life then becomes a co-creation, not a static event but a fluid dance. In this state nothing is fixed and through a person's interaction with spirit, or through embodying spirit, he or she may play a part in the unfolding of his life. This becomes a philosophical question of whether or not the human experience is pre-determined, or if human beings has free will. In the case of the latter, the human experience is elevated and divinized, equal to, not separate from the gods.

Although, it may be felt that the diviner is contacting an entity, or deity outside of himself, it is also possible that he contains that primordial intelligence within. The rational mind would like to contain the gods either within or without the human mind, but it has difficulty accepting the paradox of the sacred existing both within and without. Further, divination cannot be systematized as such into a 'one-size-fits-all' guidebook, because it is an emotional experience, personal to the diviner, it is a co-creation between human and spirit in that moment. It is a total integration of spirit and matter, a sacred act that while cannot be proven, cannot be denied either. Levy Bruhl, expounded this phenomenon in his seminal work, *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*, when he explained that, "The omen affects those to whom it pointed." (Levy-Bruhl, 1923, p.142). He elaborates on this point, saying:

Participation has a reality in so far as it is felt by an individual (even if similar participations occur at the same moment amongst various members of the group who have, for example, a single mystical experience). It is thus an event which occurs *hic et nunc*, localised in space and time, or better said which has its own space in time (Levy-Bruhl, 1795, p.59)

As I see it, this view deeply challenges the educated mind on two accounts which while out with the remit of my essay, are, I feel significant:

1. That there is a possibility for human experience outside of the space/time continuum as it is currently understood, or accepted by science.
2. That the gods might interact with a person on an individual level (challenging because it is not one singular omnipotent God, but potentially unknown spiritual agencies).

A question that seems relevant to the pre-modern and post-modern mind alike is, are the gifts of divination and communion with the spirits available to everybody, or only to those chosen through a mysterious process of selection? In primitive cultures, the role of the shaman, medicine man or *sangoma* was assigned to certain individuals who through some initiatory crisis, illness or other special event would be accepted by the rest of the tribe. Today there is no such recognized initiation and therefore little support for people involved in encounters with spirit; often they are mistakenly labelled as mentally ill.

In primitive societies, the body was very much included in the magical experience, as Naydler says, "The bodies of certain oracles and shamans were thought to be the portal

through which spirit could communicate". (*ibid*, p.151). In, *Witchcraft Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, Evans Pritchard tells how "The Azande believe that witchcraft is a substance in the bodies of witches." (Evans-Pritchard, E. and Gillies, E. (1976), p.1). Pritchard tells us that this belief is also found among many people in central and West Africa'. (*ibid*, p.1).

In Marie-Lu-Lorler's non-academic but nonetheless insightful book on shamanic healing there is an evocative definition of a shaman as someone who is "A master of energy and fire", and that fire is a medium of transformation. The word shaman she tells us means to "heat up", to "burn up". (Lörler, M., 1989, p.21). Fire, substances in the body, blood, the entrails of animals... phenomena that are linked to the world of matter... all of this is firmly rooted in physical experience. The shaman or witch doctor then appears to be able to open himself as a portal through which the spirits can communicate. "All witch techniques, all pagan orientation, was a biomystical discipline designed to help the individual and the group channel and direct the real power of the universe, radiating into and from us all." (Sjoo & Mor, 1987 p. 173).

This appears to be the case with the Sibyls of ancient Greece, or the Volvas of the Seidr tradition in Northern Europe. In this case, the Oracles who were usually women, channeled a divine intelligence through their bodies, not for self-gain, prestige or power but for the purposes of healing and strengthening the entire community. For the followers of Dionysus, Plutarch tells us that the ecstatic dance of the Maenads "Was a madness filled with prophecy and secret knowledge". (Otto, 1983, p.183). The chthonic regenerative energies of the earth as well as the subtle energies of spirit are channeled through the female body in these ancient practices, and according to Sjöo and Mor,

Women were everywhere the original mantics- the shamans, the ecstatic oracular prophets, the visionary poets. Mantism is the natural art of prophesying, divining, receiving, and channeling psychic-biological energy from the earth (*ibid* p.173).

Again the bio mystical experience is placed at the centre of divination and prophesy. To what extent women have privileged access to gods, is a moot point and out with the parameters of this essay, although for me the elephant in the room with regards to this discussion is the apparent connection between the taboo aspect of women's biological processes and sexuality and certain sacred practices such as divination and witchcraft. Witchcraft and practices such divination is not only threatening to the modern educated

mind but also to the medieval mind which notoriously dealt with the issue in a gruesome manner.

Certainly the body is not exempt from the divinatory experience in certain African tribes and as the Anthropologist Phillip Peek observes, "The balancing of the left and right sides of divinatory configurations is significant because it reflects the overall integration of mind and body". (Peek, 1991, p. 205). In the language of Iain McGilchrist, divination might be said to integrate the left and hemispheres of the brain the joining of which seems to present a perennial problem to the educated mind of reason. And here in lies the rub... whatever the issue, it always seems to get stuck in, or fall down the chasm between matter and spirit, and while the educated post-modern mind displays an intellectualism and mental reasoning par excellence, it has not yet learned the art of joined-up *being*. Divination takes its place in the mysteries of life, death and regeneration; it is both true and illusionary.

What on the one hand appears as illusion manifests on the other as truth, and this is found to be a universal aspect of divination. This is true for the twenty-first-century astrologer or Tarot-reader as it is for the sangoma with his bones (Curry, 2010, p.120).

Perhaps then there is indeed an aspect of human which transcends time and space, after all we are part spirit, part matter - the physical aspect of ourselves rooted in the earth, the other part connected to the mystery. Having access to both, infused with spirit while embodied on the earth is a privilege and power with vast potential. For those of us actively exploring these realms there is the danger of crossing unseen boundaries, of contravening spiritual laws, or becoming lost in the delusions of our own mind. While it seems that a sacred life should be the birth-right of every living being, there is also a danger that the powers bestowed from the gods may be misused or abused. Certainly such a fear gripped the minds of the mediaeval church fathers who were suspicious of the motives of people -and especially women - who possessed an ability to commune with the gods. It is no coincidence that in the centuries of torture that ensued, the body in particular was violated and maimed. There is a resonance of those fears today, as the body, and particularly the female body is denigrated and objectified, often commodified in a culture that appears to have broken off from an emotional connection with the sacred.

I hope I have conveyed an idea that, in my opinion, the reason divination is taboo to the educated mind is part of a much bigger story. Divination integrates the worlds and offers

the potential for an expanded human experience in accordance within divine will therefore releasing one the impositions of a social code whose laws may violate a higher law. Divination integrates the worlds because it accommodates both the material and spirit worlds, and it is the crucible of the material world through which life and spirit flow.

Reference List

Brown, L. and Strega, S. (n.d.). *Research as Resistance* (Quoted in **Sjöö, M., Mor, B.**)

Bruhl, L. and Clare, L. (1923). *Primitive mentality*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd

Bruhl, L. (1975). *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*. New York: Harper & Row

Collier, J. (1886) Maenads

Cornelius, G (2010) In *Divination- Perspectives for a New Millennium* (Ed, Curry, P.) Ashgate, Surrey, pp.119 – 142

Cornelius, G. (2014) *Divination, Participation and the Cognitive Continuum*. (Module Hand-out)

Curry, P. (2010). *Divination: Perspectives for a New Millennium*. Ashgate Publishing Group.

Eliade, M. (1964). *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Routledge & Kegan Paul

Freud, S. (1946). *Totem and Taboo*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf

Jung, C. and Franz, M. (1964). *Man and his Symbols*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday

Jung, C. (1970). *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Harrison, J.E (1919), *Rationalism and Religious Reaction*, Conway Memorial Lecture, delivered at South Place Institute, London

Lörler, M. (1989). *Shamanic Healing Within the Medicine Wheel*. Albuquerque, N.M.: Brotherhood of Life. Clarendon press

McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The Master and his Emissary*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Naydler, J. (2009). *The Future of the Ancient World*. Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions

Otto W. (1965). *Dionysus, Myth and Cult*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Peek, P. (1991). *African Divination Systems*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Pritchard, E. and Gillies, E. (1976). *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford

Sjöö, M., Mor, B. and Sjöö, M. (1987). *The Great Cosmic Mother*. San Francisco: Harper & Row

Thompson, W. (1981). *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*. New York: St. Martin's Press

Waterhouse, J. W. (1902) *The Crystal Ball*

Wilber, K. (1998). *The Essential Ken Wilber*. Boston: Shambhala

