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A Web of Words

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1. Introduction

Although divination practices are common throughout Africa, the use of spiders and land crabs appears to have a relatively restricted distribution, being confined to the Nigeria/Cameroon borderland, with some possible extension eastwards in Chad and Gabon.

This paper has two functions: to summarily describe the methods of divination in this area and to map its distribution. By compiling the terminology for both land crabs and spiders, it is possible to show that these are not only related to each other but also to a far larger nexus of meanings of considerable importance in the vocabulary of proto-Bantu.

Divination using spiders falls into two types: simple and complex. The documentary evidence remains too uneven to produce a confident synthetic account. However, the following pattern seems to emerge from the literature (a more detailed survey is to be found in Zeitlyn, 1987):

1. The simple form uses a few (usually less than ten) sticks placed around the spider hole. Different meanings are associated with the sticks either by their position or through markings scratched onto their surfaces. Divination is through the interpretation of the pattern created by the emergence of the creature from its hole, thereby disturbing the sticks.

2. The complex form uses a set of leaves on which are drawn ideograms. The pattern created by disturbing the stack of leaves by the spider is interpreted by the diviner to give the results. The interpretation is guided by the position of the leaves with respect to certain fixed marks, either lines drawn in the dust, or stones placed near the hole. This form of divination is often preceded by an initial divination using the simpler form; the leaves are then used to give extra detail.

The secondary literature with regard to groups on the Adamawa plateau makes frequent reference to divination using sticks, straws and pebbles. The type of sortilege divination which has been described in detail among the Mundang in Chad (Adler & Zempléni, 1972) is widespread and occurs in the same area as crab divination. For example, it is

used by both the Tupuri (Guillard, 1965:127 & Ruelland, 1988:115) and the Mofu (Vincent 1970:71). When the presence or otherwise of land crabs is not mentioned it is generally assumed that they are not used in the local form of divination.

The language family terminology used in this article may be unfamiliar to some readers. It is based on the recent publication 'The Niger-Congo Languages' (Bendor-Samuel, 1989) which includes discussions of Benue-Congo (Williamson, 1989) and Bantoid (Hedinger, 1989 & Watters, 1989). Additional discussion of these revised classifications can be found in Blench (1989, forthcoming).

2. Crab Divination

There are a number of species of land crab in West Africa (Monod, 1980:369 ff.) most importantly *Potamonautes* and *Sudanonautes* spp. in the Nigeria/Cameroon borderland. Balss (1929:115 ff.) provides a number of useful vernacular names for the Cameroonian land crabs. The land crab used by the Mambila has been identified as *Sudanonautes (convexonautes) aubryi* (Zeitlyn 1990:83).

Crab divination appears to be used by the Samba Daka and Samba Leeko, the Momi (Vere) and adjacent peoples. The most detailed description of it has been published by van Beek (1978:221-233). Pieces of calabash, some stalks of grass, and a variety of other objects are placed in a dish of moistened sand. The stalks are identified by the differential placing of knots as male, female or if plain as representing a hut or a granary. The calabash pieces are marked and the objects have fixed meanings associated with them. Van Beek notes (op cit: 225-7) that broadly speaking the grass stalks represent "immobile" objects (ie. basic elements of society in general) and the calabash fragments represent "mobile" objects (individuals). A crab is placed onto the sand and the surface covered for some time. The pattern resulting from the disturbance of the objects in the dish by the crab is then interpreted by the diviner. Although there are some general rules of interpretation it appears (*pace* van Beek) that the diviner has great freedom. He responds to the pattern of objects in the dish, viewed in the light of the problem at hand.

Among the Mambila and the Vute, who both live near the edge of the Adamawa Plateau, the crab can be an alternative to spiders in the "standard" forms of divination summarized above. It is relatively unusual to find the "northern" crab used for "southern" spider divination.

3. SPIDER DIVINATION

The use of a spider in divination was first recorded in 1621 in South America (De Arriaga, 1968). However, there is no evidence for a link with the systems in Cameroon and Eastern Nigeria, which do appear to be historically interconnected. Among the identifications for the spiders which have been published are: *Heteroscroda crassipes* among the Yamba (Gebauer, 1963:42), *Phoneyusa bidentata* Pocock, 1899 among the Bekpak (Leiderer, 1982, 1:116) and *Hysteroocrates robustus* Pocock, 1899 among the Mambila.

The basic techniques of spider divination have been summarized above, and further detail may be found in Zeitlyn 1987, 1990, Leiderer 1982. In early reports, divination is mentioned in passing without details. After the First World War, Colonial Officers were encouraged to include ethnological information in their intelligence reports. One excellent early account is of Mbembe spider divination (Pollock, 1926). C.K. Meek, the Nigerian Government anthropologist, refers to spider divination in passing (Meek, 1931 a: 328-9), as does Jeffreys (1953a,b). Among French researchers, Labouret (1935) noted its presence, whilst it is mentioned in one Colonial report from the Banyo area (Banyo, Rapport Général, 1935). Dellenbach (1930, 1932) published two sets of Bamun divination cards, although the illustrations in Paré (1956) are far more comprehensive. Dugast's account of Nen divination (1960:43ff) uses sticks, stones and the leaves simultaneously, although primacy is given to the positions of the sticks. Dugast also appears (on literary evidence) to be the author of the anonymous "Rapport Général sur la Sorcellerie, 1935" (in Cameroon National Archives, Yaoundé).

Spider divination is also recorded among the immediate neighbours of the Mambila, the Tikar, the Kwanja, the Bangwa (Pradelles, 1979), the Mfumte/Wuli (Baeke, 1984) and the Oku (Krafczyk, 1982). Forgwe (1983) calls the Meta version *Tikafu* and it figures in the work of some contemporary Cameroonian authors (e.g. Matip n.d., & Hegba, 1979). Attention is

commonly given to the meanings of the individual cards (illustrated by many of the authors already cited) but less to the processes of interpretation by which the diviner is able to answer the question by reference to the meanings of the cards and their positions.

Gebauer's (1964) monograph on the Yamba techniques, *Spider Divination in the Cameroons* is the definitive work on the meanings of cards, although still meagre on the process of interpretation. More recently, detailed accounts have concerned groups practising the "complex" form of divination, for example, the Bekpak (Bafia) (Leiderer, 1982, l:161ff), the Bamiléké (Pradelles 1986) and the Mambila (Zeitlyn, 1987).

4. Crabs, spiders and related meanings in Bantu languages

We wish to explore the hypothesis that there is a vocabulary complex which includes the terms for divination, spider and crab. Appendix 1 shows a table of all the terms we have been able to compile that relate to this vocabulary complex. Terms for 'crab' and 'spider' have been listed somewhat indiscriminately, since few authors distinguish species or detail their role in divination. In addition, the following terms are set out: divination, medicine, and diviner/healer. The following patterns are evident:

1. There is a root for 'crab' which is at least as ancient as Proto-Benue-Congo and which presumably can be reconstructed **kamba*, since the prenasalized bilabial consonant in C₂ position is retained in some Bantu forms, such as the Basaa *ngombo*. Reflexes in other languages either have a final nasal (Shall *kan*), a lateral (Balep *-kal*) or else a bilabial (Mada *-kab*).

2. There is a root for 'medicine' that exists in a number of Adamawa languages (Nyongnepa, Mumuye and Pere) of the approximate form **gana*. Related forms are found in some Benue-Congo languages, but are not sufficiently widespread to argue that such a root formed part of the proto-language. At least one form has a voiceless initial consonant (Shall *kan*). If it is accepted that weakening is a more likely process of sound change than strengthening, the word has probably passed from Benue-Congo to adjacent Adamawa languages. At any rate, it is not recorded with the meaning "divination" in these languages and almost certainly has nothing to do with the root for 'crab'.

3. Among Somié Mambila (where both crab and spider divination are practised concurrently) the same word, *Agame*, is applied to both. This therefore suggests that at this point in the phylogenesis of Bantu languages crabs, spiders and divination became inextricably linked. Regrettably, the evidence for the terminology relating both to crabs and spiders in Mambiloid and other 'North Bantoid' languages such as Ngoro and Vute as well as the Dakoid languages is incomplete.

4. Among the Bantu-speaking populations further south, crab divination disappears (presumably due to the changing ecology?) and only spiders are associated with divination. Among the Nen (Dugast, 1960:40) the same term is applied to spider and as a generic for divination. This coincides with a diagnostic devoicing of the velar in C₁ position. Forms such as *gam* for divination are documented among Bassa and Beti (Hegba, 1979:146, Matip n.d.:37) and among the Beti-speaking groups in southern Cameroon (Laburthe-Tolra 1984:69, Mallart Guimera 1981:48 & Towo-Atanga, 1966).

5. Meanwhile, the terms for 'medicine' became so similar to words for divination that they were re-interpreted as part of the same verbal nexus. As a result in Narrow Bantu, spider, diviner, healer and medicine show a set of closely linked forms.

6. Related forms also show up in both Chadic languages (e.g. Hausa and Mbara) and Fulfulde. It is here assumed that these are recent loans.

5. Conclusion

Crab and spider divinatory systems are strikingly rich and complex aspects of the culture of the peoples of the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland, and deserve to be better known. This paper provides a glimpse of the distribution of these systems together with a preliminary interpretation of the vocabulary associated with them. It is striking that only the Mambila people are reported to use both crabs and spiders in divination. The Mambila Plateau thus appears to be the crucial 'crossover' point where crabs are exchanged for spiders. However, our knowledge of both the ethnography and linguistics of this region remain so sketchy as to make this a programme for further research rather than a definitive conclusion.

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The linguistic data on which this paper is based is drawn either from published sources or from fieldwork conducted by the authors 1983-1990 (Blench in Nigeria and Zeitlyn in Cameroon).

Added in proof: Since this article was written Jan Vansina has published a book "Paths in the Rainforest. Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa" (1990, London, James Currey). Vansina refers (p 13 & 300) to the continuous distribution of the root *-gmbi as evidence for its comparative recent introduction. Our survey lends weight to his assertion.

Résumé

Il nous semble que, en Afrique, les oracles de la mygale et de la crevette d'eau douce sont limités à la région frontalière entre la Nigeria et le Cameroun avec des branches éventuelles dans le Tchad et le Gabon. Dans cette région, les systèmes de divination se révèlent d'une manière surprenante comme des aspects culturels riches et complexes. Il y appartient un vocabulaire qui s'est diffusé évidemment ensemble avec ce complexe de divination en négligeant les unités linguistique de de la classification génétique. Dans cet article nous traitons en détail les lexèmes pour les concepts de "crevette", "mygale", "divination", "médecine", "divinateur", "guérisseur" et "prédire". La population du plateau de Mambila qui pratique l'oracle de la mygale et également celui de la crevette d'eau douce nous semble d'être les représentants d'une culture transitoire entre les cultures du nord utilisant pour la divination exclusivement la crevette et celle du sud utilisant exclusivement la mygale. Pour vérifier cette thèse d'autres recherches ethnographiques et linguistiques dans la région sont nécessaires.

Zusammenfassung

Das Wahrsagen mit Hilfe von Spinnen und Landkrabben scheint in Afrika auf das Grenzgebiet zwischen Nigeria und Kamerun und mögliche Ausläufer in Chad und Gabun begrenzt zu sein. Die zugehörigen Wahrsagesysteme erweisen sich als überraschend reiche und komplexe Aspekte der Kulturen in diesem Raum. Zu diesen Wahrsagesystemen gehört ein Vokabular - im vorliegenden Beitrag werden Lexeme mit den Bedeutungen "Krabbe", "Spinne", "Wahrsagerei", "Medizin", "Wahrsager", "Heiler", "wahrsagen" besprochen - das sich offenbar, genetische Spracheinheiten übergreifend gemeinsam mit diesem Wahrsagekomplex verbreitet hat. Die Bevölkerungen des Mambila-Plateau, die sowohl Krabben wie Spinnen benutzen, scheinen den Übergang zwischen nur Krabben verwendenden Kulturen im Süden darzustellen. Weitere ethnographische und linguistische Forschungen in der Region sind nötig, um zu abgesicherten Erkenntnissen zu kommen.

Appendix: Data

In the table below spiders are divided into the categories "house" and "ground" for some languages. This reflects a distinction between those spiders which make their webs on the walls or ceilings of houses and those which live in holes in the ground. The latter are commonly used in divination. In the case of crabs there is a similar distinction between those which live in rivers, labelled "water", and the land crabs inhabiting holes in the ground, labelled "land".

	Spider	Crab	Divination	Medicine	Berné Congo diviner	healer	to divine
Abon	nɛkɛ bɛmɛ	kurú, kuri	ebeá		áfúfú	onye ebeá	
Eggon				éáám			
Jukun/ Tékum	bé-kiɛdo	*kaɲ					
Ida		keɓ		ken			
Shall		ɩ-ʔáɛrɛ					
tihun		/ʔáɛrɛ (land)					
Tunen		nɛn					
Yeskwa				aqalan			
Chamba Daka (Hapeo)		kaén		gé:n	Dakoid	gáaá	

	Spider	Crab	Divination	Medicine	diviner	healer	to divine
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Mambiloid							
Kwanja (Ndemem)	nyaradara (house); ga (ground)	kamben (water); kamben song (land)	songe	mbone			
Kwanja (Ndung)	tibanggá (house); gír (ground)	kam (water); kam yár (land)	masi	mboone	wam mboone	wog síj	sipene
Kwanja (Tonba)	nyadara (house); yún (ground)	kamba (water); kamba (land)	yún	mvuli	nor mvuli	nor yún	
Mambila (Somé)	ngame (divination spider) ndògò (generic)	kaap (generic) ngame (used for divination)	ngam	lè	nuar ngam		mbo
Mambila (Kara)	gwandegris (house); ngam (ground)	kaaben (water); ngam (land)	ngam				
Mambila Magu (Zongo Ajiya)	tandulu; danduru (house); sansan (ground)	Kamben (generic); kambe san (land)	kamben		kaggonon	kajen	
Mambila (Mbemga)	tanjo (house); ngom (ground)	kap (water); kamguli (land)	ngam	kúr			

	Spider	Crab	Divination	Medicine	diviner	healer	to divine
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Mambila Mbopno (Kakara)	ngimbene (house); gulo (ground)	kamben	kajen (with crab); ngam (with spider)		wulu sum bú		
Mambila (Ibar)	ndupsi (house); ngom (ground)	kaap (generic); kaap ngom (land)	ngom	.			
Mambila (Ngubin)	ngam	kamben	ngam				yipene
Mambila (Tamyar)	ndan (house); ngam (ground)	kap (water); ngam (land)	ngam				
Ndoro (Baissa)	andara	acara	cala		ana	ne cala	
Vute		kaam (Guarisma: ká:m)	ngar	tíngare (healer) tíngám (fr. féticheur)			
Wawa		kam					

Wide Bantu						
Common Bantu	*-bòbè	*-kádá		*-gàngá (787)	*-gàngá	B*-B-ók-
Aghem		ékómɛ		ótwi (ntii)		
Balep		é-kál/ bè crab		p-guán/ bè-nguán		bó
Bamileke		kamtot				
Bamoun		kám				

	Spider	Crab	Divination	Medicine	diviner	healer	to divine
Banvélé		ngomba; kapa; okérélé					
Basa-Basa		rombo; yala					
BatuKamin (Zongomata)	tikuku (house); stenfu (ground)	fūn (land) ; kuñ (water)	fiu bu nwa abon		kulau		
Bekpak (Bafia)	gām (ground) kaákòóq (generic)	kā?	gām		n̄lòó-gām	m̄óóó-ḡūm	
Duala		muyéḡé					
Ewondo		kada					
Fang/Beti	ngam	kada	ngam				
Kuteb		kūkān					
Kuteb (Takum)	ʃíʃá; ʃíʃap?	kəka	pwá (with crab)	ci		ndè te cá pwá	
Lamso	ngam	ngam					
Mabea		da					
Manenguba (Babong)				bw-àngá (? with deletion of initial consonant)			
Manenguba (Balon)		ngómbo					
Manenguba (Ibo)	ngáábunè						
Manenguba (Iwaneka)					ngan (fr. " voyant")		
Manenguba (Iyanga)					mox ngan		

	Spider	Crab	Divination	Medicine	diviner	healer	to divine
Manenguba (Proto- form)	*-gān ; *-bób	*-è-séj. *-jāC ?			*-àngá	*-gān	
Manenguba		*kam					
Ibo		edo					
Ibom		alak (?by metathesis)					
Nen (Baren)	éḡamb-óbó	bu-any. m-any (?with deletion of initial consonant)	éḡamb		móndo w' éḡamb	émwen	obo
Ngomba		njombo; da					
Noni		ekame				ngan (healer)	
Nta		è-kān/bá		è-kām/r-			bu
Soubou		ésosé					
Tigon (Gidesa)	jafi	nké	ke		ekwé	wake	
Tigon (Nambaba)	dawentóó	pké	pké; ké		bwanbu	bwanbu pké	
Tikar		ko	ngam				
Tiv		í-kámá/á					
Yamba	ngam ntye	kam	ngam				

Spider	Crab	Divination	Medicine	diviner	healer	to divine
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Fulfulde	Others						
	cancayó; tawtaw	ɲarkée; ɲerkée	hatti; noddaandu	nyawndiigu		nyawndoowo	nodda
Hausa		kāguwa; kaḡwa					
Mumuye	lanlan	san		ɓnan		kpanti ɓnan	
Nyongnɛpa		gāṅā					