

“It’s just the starting engine”

The status of spirits and objects in south Mozambican divination

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When you are familiar with Henri Junod’s work on divination (1897; 1996) and manage to observe a contemporary *tinhlolo*¹ set, you will notice important differences between what you read and what you are seeing. Did the old master of southern Mozambique ethnography generalize from a particular case? Or had this divination set changed through the last century, according to new influences and social conditions?

Both answers are probably affirmative; but I believe none of the questions is the most accurate one. If I heard them several times, this is probably the result of two common assumptions amongst people interested in this subject:

First, we are so aware of the very strict metaphors which usually connect each divination object to the social reality it represents that, when we identify them, we tend to assume that it would be difficult to substitute that object with something else – and even more difficult to achieve a consensus about that substitution. Secondly, we read so many times about divination sets which are believed to have a power of themselves and a life of their own that, by omission, we often expect a bit too easily that this will happen with the next example we will meet.

In the case of the Mozambican *tinhlolo* divination set, I will rather suggest, reproducing a diviner’s sentence,² that it is «*just the starting engine*» of a process where the most crucial elements are believed to lay elsewhere: in the spirits who possess the diviner, in his interaction with the client, and in the communication between his spirits and the client’s ancestors.

So, although it requires to be ritually “tuned” to its master, *tinhlolo* is seen as an instrumental set of objects, very useful as a technological mean but without any power in itself – just like, to use another diviner’s metaphor, with the use of the stethoscope.

¹ The spelling “nhl” corresponds to a blown “x”, vocalised with the tongue arched up to the palate.

² This article is, indeed, mostly based on conversations with southern Mozambican diviner-healers and on the observation of their «*consultations*» - the current word to designate a divination session, in a lexical extrapolation from the “sessions” with academically recognised medical doctors. The data were collected between 2004 and 2006, and I do strongly acknowledge all those who allowed my presence, tolerated my questions and engaged in enlightening answers to them, with very special thanks to Job Massingue and to Jaime Zucula, his client in the session where most of the photos of this article were taken.

A short description

The most complete *tinhlolos* we can nowadays find in Maputo and Gaza provinces are, in fact, composed of three different sets (image 1).



(image 1) A current complete *tinhlolo* set.

Two of them are considered by their users as variations of the same divination set and method, which existed prior to the Nguni invasions of southern Mozambique in the early 19th century.³ Both are composed of six similar elements: in one case, the so-called *tinguenha*, the pieces are crocodile back scales; in the other, the *thiakata*, they are nut shells from a tree called *nulu*, which plays an important role in the treatment of people diagnosed as spirits-possessed. For that purpose, the leaves of the tree are crushed and macerated in water, then shaken until a large amount of foam is obtained, and the patient must eat that foam three times a day, in order to appease his spirits' impatience during the education as a future diviner/healer.

³ About the rise, assimilation policy and fall of the Gaza empire, resulting from that invasion, see for instance Neves (1987 [1878]), Clarence-Smith (1990 [1985]), Liesegang (1986), Pélissier (1994) and Vilhena (1996).

If the *thiakata* directly emphasises, thus, the presence and importance of the spirits, both sets have in common the classification of their elements as three males and three females, and share the same principles of divinatory reading. This one is based on the amount and gender of the elements that fall with the “up” or “down” side visible, on the geographic directions they point to, and on the lineal combinations they draw.

Those two sets are described as «*the most traditional ones*», and diviners often claim their ancestors «*only needed one of those to make a consultation*». It is, however, less consensual who used which one of them in the past. Some diviners claim that only active warriors owned the *tinguenha*, while others connect its use with the possession by spirits considered «*from water*», and a third group says that the reason was mostly geographical: if the diviners lived close to a river, they would use it; otherwise, they would use the *nulu* nut shells. As we will soon see, they are nowadays used as redundant confirmation sets on the first throw of «*important consultations*», and as independent sets when it is necessary to answer to client's direct questions. In this last occasion, the one to be used – *nulu* shells or crocodile scales – depends on the preferences of the spirit who «*is working*» together with the diviner, in that session.

The third partial set of *tinhlolo*, the larger and more diversified one, is the most similar to Junod's (1897; 1996) and Earthy's (1933) descriptions. Southern Mozambican diviners sometimes mention it as «*Nguni tinhlolo*», because it is believed to have a Zulu origin and to have been brought by Nguni invaders.

Also this set is mostly composed of male/female couples, including eighteen cowries, four coins and two stones, together with the down side of two land turtles' carapaces, deformed seeds of *canhu* or its carved representation on that tree's wood,⁴ and astragalus of several animals, both savage and domestic. The domestic ones are a male sheep - which stands alone because it represents the chief and there is only one lineage chief - and nine goats, representing people of different gender, age and status. The savage animals' bones are said to come from chimpanzees,⁵ lions, kudus, gnus, impalas and a mountain gazelle. Besides this basic set, it is also acceptable to include new elements, representing modern social entities which weren't previewed on it, or

⁴ As Junod already stressed, *canhoeiro* is one of the possible ancestors' shelter trees, and an appreciated beer for communitarian consumption is made with its fruit. He however preferred to omit that both the appreciation and the collective consumption are connected with the aphrodisiac power ascribed to the drink.

⁵ I have strong doubts about this identification, since biologists' references say that the only big ape or monkey existing in Mozambique or near its borders is the baboon. Most diviners I know, though, used the word chimpanzee.

even new representations of old notions. Sometimes, those elements become so common that we could consider them “standard” as well, as it is happening with red, black and white dice, representing spirits with different origins (image 2).



(image 2) Dice in another current *tinhlolo* set – photo Cristiana Bastos.

However, more than explain the divination meanings attached to each element or its reading principles (which would require, by itself, a larger article than this one), I would like to call the reader's attention to a comment that, in its essence, I heard repeatedly when *tinhlolo* sets were presented to me: «*Those bones aren't really the way they should be, because each one of these things is connected with a certain animal. In the old days, if it was the muluve, the ancestor, you would have to use the wild boar bone. But today we use **symbols** [my emphasis] and collect the pieces as we can find them. Then, we give the name according to the needs.*»

So, although it is presupposed an archetypical era when there was some natural or supernatural connection between the kind of animal that provided the bone and the social entity which the bone represents during the divination process, it is as well assumed that it is not a problem to change it – and that, in the end, it does not really matter what object you use, if you and your spirits know what it means.

As another diviner put it, «*It's important to do it this way, because it's our tradition... Besides, people expect us to use a proper tinhlolo; they could get suspicious about our powers, otherwise. But I guess it would work the same if I would use cards, or stones, or whatever. I just don't know if those ones [her spirits] would like it much. But, if we couldn't get bones, they would have to cope with it, isn't it?*»

The diviner and his/her spirits

In so few pages, I already mentioned several times the diviners' spirits. I had to do it because spirits are an inevitable reference in every conversation on this subject, since being spirits-possessed is a local *sine qua non* condition for the divination practice and ability.

Indeed, you are not supposed to choose to become a diviner; you are chosen for that task by spirits who «*want to work*» by possessing you. They select you amongst your relatives, and you may inherit them from both sides of your family – in a parallel with the social situation, where agnatic descent principles are predominant but not exclusive (Webster, 1976), going together with alliance feelings and duties which endure for some generations, and with recurrent factors like bridewealth irregularities (Granjo, 2005) or the inheritance of your personal name.

In exceptional cases, which I only detected in families whose parents inherited a large amount of spirits, their choice can be announced - through divination, trance, or an impressive dream – even before the child's birth, together with the baby's gender and name. Those exceptions are explained by the behavioural attributes ascribed to spirits, which are very similar to those of “traditionalist” living people. So, they are expected to do not like crowded host places/people, which potentially creates conflicts amongst them, and will tend to “divide the village” between two subsequent generations, instead of waiting for the diviner's death in order to possess one of his/her grandchildren.

Normally, though, the spirits' claim over the person will assume the form of a «*calling illness*» that, together with individualized manifestations, will usually include strong pains and a general weakness, to which biomedicine does not find apparent explanation. If the person does not recognise, refuses or tries to delay the call, systematic misfortunes, illnesses and deaths are expected to happen amongst his/her relatives.

This violent spirits' behaviour is not ascribed to wickedness, but to the limitations they face in their present form of existence. Although powerful (and power

demonstration is also a conspicuous issue, here), they are just “what’s left” from the person they had been; for that reason, they are not able to communicate directly with the living, and have to indirectly call their attention with abnormal and undesired events, in order to make themselves understood through experts’ divination or trance. Besides, spirits who do not possess anybody are believed to be «*like children*», with a capricious and impatient attitude (Honwana, 2002), especially if they found themselves impotent to transmit the message they wish to communicate.

The result will be a dynamic which fits very much into the notion of “affliction cult” (Turner, 1968), although I doubt that “cult” is the best word to express it: The person afflicted by the *calling illness* will seek remedy from a diviner-healer and, once diagnosed as possessed by legitimate spirits who «*want to work*», will only be able to overpass the affliction by accepting to also become a diviner-healer, or otherwise he/she may die. The patient will, then, become a therapist, and the oft semi-sceptical believer will become a belief spreader and practitioner.

Some cases are known – as the one recorded by Polanah (1987) – when it is possible to negotiate with legitimate spirits an alternative person to be possessed and, consequently, to become a diviner-healer. Putatively, though, that negotiation is very difficult and it is only possible when spirits manifest for the first time inside one’s family.

I just mentioned “legitimate spirits” and family factors, possibly transmitting the idea that the legitimacy of spirits’ claims to possess somebody arises from their status as ancestors, and that every ancestor is a spirit. In this context this is not the case.

On the latter issue, we may say that, if every spirit is an ancestor to someone (in as much as he/she has descendants), few ancestors become spirits. Everybody is believed to have a spiritual part which survives death and remains on Earth, protecting and correcting his/her descendants - descendants who have the duty to honour and submit to their ancestors as they are supposed to do towards senior kin, in a similar way to Kopytoff’s polemic suggestion (1971) of equalization between ancestors and elders. Nevertheless, only some of those spiritual “remains” achieve special powers, as a result of their exceptional spiritual strength, status or actions during life, or due to negative circumstances on their death. Only those are, in a strict sense, spirits.

Concerning the legitimacy of those spirits of a diviner who are not his/her ancestors, it must be stressed that, on the contrary, the “full range” of abilities accessible

to a diviner-healer depends on his/her possession by spirits of three different origins (image 3).

Spirits' origin	Main ability and task	Complementary abilities and tasks
<i>vaNguni</i>	Divination	Cure Consultation/healing leadership
<i>Tingulwe</i> (ancestors)	Cure	Divination Spirits' household leadership
<i>vaNdau</i>	<i>Kufemba</i> (exorcism)	-

(image 3) Kinds of spirits usually possessing diviner-healers.

One should note that this classification does not exclude exceptional further integrations. For instance, I know a diviner-healer who claims to be possessed, besides all the others, by the spirit of a man with Luso-Indian origin and no kinship ties to his family, and even I was diagnosed as a future spirit, after my death, although I am classified as a European without previous family connections to Africa.

This is, nevertheless, a consensual division of powers and spirits' origins and, as Alcinda Honwana suggested (2002), it reproduces in "ethnic" terms - from the point of view of southern Mozambique - socially shared representations about the wars and the rise of the Gaza Empire, started in the early 19th century and defeated by Portuguese effective occupation of the territory, in 1895.

Presenting it in words of my own responsibility, we have, on one side, the Nguni invader and later ruler, whose warfare and divination techniques kept an image of superiority that often match him, in folk and diviners' speech, to the mythological leitmotiv of the civilizing hero; we have, secondly, the «owners of the land», the previous people who were vanquished and assimilated by the invader, and owe their subsequent status and name to their submission;⁶ we have finally the Ndau, remembered as the consistently resisting rebel, whose determination and endurance could only be explained by a strong spiritual power, which is still feared nowadays.⁷

⁶ The name of the larger linguistic group in southern Mozambique is "Changana", deriving from the expression "servants of Soshangana", political name of the first Gaza emperor.

⁷ In some accordance with its political base, this kind of classification was recuperated and emphasized during the long civil war that ended in 1992 and since then has been manipulated in regionalist claims—which sometimes even use the expression «Zulu colonialism» (Florêncio, 2005). Besides, the civil war is often mentioned by diviners as «the spirits' war», in parallelism to Geffray's (1991) analyses. Notice also that the Portuguese tend to be considered strong spirits, in a direct but implicit explanation of Ngungunyane's (the last Gaza emperor) defeat and the subsequent colonial domination.

However, in a different sense, the family is also the legitimating principle for “foreign” spirits’ integration, following a logic of guilt and duty. Indeed, the legitimacy of a spirit’s claim for possessing somebody and to «*work*» derives from his relationship with that person’s family ancestors, when the claiming spirit was alive in the past. Typically, a Nguni spirit would be an ancestor’s close friend or master who strongly helped the family and has no more descendants, while vaNdau spirits could be a woman who was brought from the war as a slave and concubine, could be her slaughtered relatives to whom she showed the way to the house of the conquerors who kept her as slave, or could be an unmarried warrior who claimed a living wife from his killer’s family and eventually decided to *work*, when his rage was appeased.

Incidentally, the later reason for possession imposes, nowadays, the public consideration of the spiritual consequences from the civil war which ended in 1992, particularly because many soldiers from RENAMO rebel forces were Ndau speakers and emphasized that characteristic, in order to capitalise the belief in vaNdau ability to come back from the death to get revenge. Due to the generalised performance of post-war cleansing rituals in southern Mozambique (Granjo, 2006), the claims of deceased soldiers are not expected to happen during their killer’s lives; so, many healers are genuinely worried about an “epidemic” of spirits’ claims in the next generation, when civil war veterans will start to die. But in the central region of the country – where there are no cleansing rituals rooted in this “ethnic” classification of working spirits - the situation is quite different, although we could consider it a structural re-appropriation of the southern concepts I just described: In the zones where RENAMO was considered an external force to the community, emerged after the war the so-called Gamba spirits, which are aggressive, connected with traumatic situations and believed to be previous vaNdau soldiers from RENAMO; meanwhile, in vaNdau home areas (with no tradition of integrating spirits from other Mozambican groups) the abundant new Gamba spirits are seen as Zimbabwean commandos, although those troops suffered few casualties and used to carry their corpses back home.⁸

Independently from the spirit’s origin, however, the ontological outcome of the possession is very much the same. Although the spirit does not constantly remains in a person’s body, both the spirit and the living individual are supposed to cease being the separate entities that they were, to become a joint symbiotic being, with a new and

⁸ Data on Gamba spirits provided, respectively, by Robert Marlin (2007) and by Victor Igreja (2007).

common identity. In this way, each influences the behaviour and identity of the other, learning how to coexist during their training process to become a diviner-healer. Indeed, a local dogma states that it is the spirit (and not his/her host) who is trained to work, because the spirit's knowledge was forgotten since the death of the previous host; if the person should also learn along the way, this is a result of the symbiosis between the two.

A final characteristic we should keep in mind is that, as Harry West (2005) eloquently shows for northern Mozambique, those diviner-healers aren't at all closed into a repetitive traditionalistic speech or practice. On the contrary, they produce experiments, speculations and innovations, and they are eager for external recognition and knowledge with possible pertinence to their work – an external knowledge that may well be an asset in gaining and maintaining current clients.

Domestication of aleatoriness

Even if some of the above mentioned characteristics seem to be unique to this regional context, the divination and healing demarche where *tinhlolo* is integrated follows a *domestication of aleatoriness*⁹ logic which is not at all original in Africa.

Its starting point is the notion that randomness does not exist as a “real reality”, so to say, nor does exist coincidences. For that reason, events which harm or benefit people presuppose an underlying reason, especially if they are recurrent.

However, those underlying reasons do not substitute or stand in opposition to material causality. Indeed, it is considered that the world is full of material and natural hazards, which are ruled by material causes. Some of the material logics of the hazards are known, others are not, but it is assumed that whether known or not, there is some logic that exists. I believe this assumption is even one of the reasons for healers' interest in “foreign” knowledge, as well as for the use of some products which they include in their receipts due to metonymy - I mean, in several cases that inclusion doesn't seem to arise from a believed magical or symbolic power of the product, but from the assumption of a still unknown (but real) material causality which connects the product and the desired effect.

⁹ By “domestication of aleatoriness”, I mean the attribution of a sense and causality to randomness and uncertainty that make them seen as cognoscible, regulated, explainable or even dominated by human beings (Granjo, 2004).

But, if undesired events are believed to follow material causal relations, it is considered that they can only harm a person due to social reasons.

The first potential reason to be checked is the victims' possible inability or negligence. If one is unaware of the proper way to do some specific action, if one has not had sufficient experience or training to do it correctly, or does not take the required precautions (that is, if one is socially inadequate to do what was attempted), then this will be the reason for the harm and no further inquiries will be necessary. For instance, if someone became infected with HIV without knowing the existence of AIDS, ignoring its contagion mechanisms and how to avoid the infection - or if, knowing all those things, rejected the use of condoms or used them inconsistently due to reasons arising from his individual personality - the victim's ignorance or consistent carelessness will be the cause for his disease; but if a regular user of condoms gets infected when exceptionally did not use them, it is necessary to understand and to explain why he did not use the condom in the most dangerous occasion.

So, the invocation of other social reasons will only happen if the victim was (or used to be) competent, careful and, nevertheless, was harmed by the undesired event.

One of those reasons is sorcery, which is normally ascribed to jealousy or other socially negative feelings or aims and is believed to attract people to the danger, or to distract them from its existence and imminence. Besides those effects, is also believed that sorcery may act directly over material factors, but those diagnosis are rare and, usually, limited to situations of very strong collective tension.

The other reason to be harmed could be a lack of protection from the victim's ancestors, which – on the contrary – are supposed to alert their descendants to the hazards or to attract them away from the areas where imminent dangers exist, yet failed to do so. As I mention above, this would be the ancestors' way to call for the one's attention, so the next step will be to find out why are they displeased, and how can the victim correct his/her fault or, at least, appease them. This would also be a strictly social reason because, in one hand, the motives for ancestors' displeasure are social behaviours occurred in the present or in the past and because, in the other hand, ancestors are not seen as extra-social entities. Indeed, those who die are not supposed to migrate to some spiritual world apart from the one where they lived, nor to become members - unlike in the case of South-Amerindian perspectivism (Castro 1996) – of some parallel society, contiguous in space but unable to recognise itself as similar to the

living humans; under a different form, they stay in the world where they lived, as a constituent part of the society and social relations.

In the specific case of illness, the interpretation is basically similar to the explanation of misfortune in general. Even if the existence of «*hospital diseases*» is recognised and the local aetiological theories are often parallel to the academic ones (Green, 1999), illness is not seen as just a physical problem. Indeed, health is considered the person's normal and expected state, but it requires a situation of general harmony between the living, their social and ecological environment, and their ancestors – who, as I mentioned before, keep with them a relationship which follows the general rules of family protection and social control. Health is, thus, jeopardised by the same factors which might jeopardise that harmony: one's carelessness, the livings' sorcery or the ancestors' displeasure, together with the ecological dangers (often of spiritual nature – Granjo, 2006) and the spirits' claim to «*work*».

So, a physical manifestation of illness presupposes a lack of spiritual balance, which again presupposes social causes. Consequently, it is not enough to treat the illness; it is also necessary to restore the social balance and the harmony with the ancestors, or the problem will keep reappearing because its ultimate cause was not solved.

As I suggested some pages ago, this interpretation system is not, thus, original in Africa. Although it suits the explanation of both the misfortune and the conspicuous good fortune, its general principles are very similar to Evans-Pritchard's classic interpretation of Azande witchcraft (1978 [1937]), except for the ancestors' and spirits' central importance in the Mozambican case. But also this later characteristic is common in southern and central Africa (Jansen 1992; van Dijk 2000), and can even be found up north, in different contexts than the so-called Ngoma model (Westerlund 2000; Masquelier 2001).

Arrived to this point, we could be induced to think that only the local vision about the material world follows the “deterministic chaos” model proposed by Ron Eglash (2005), while the local vision about the relation between people and world would rather follow a deterministic logic. However, if the interpretation system I described appears to be very strict, the application of its principles to real life is less direct than we might presuppose from its general presentation, and that is due to the recognised complexity of the factors involved in social relations.

Indeed, we could expect that someone who always does the right things to the living and always acts according to ancestors' rules would be considered safeguarded from unpleasant surprises, but this is not the case. Amongst the livings, even that person's correct behaviour could become an object of envy and, therefore, provide a motive to make him a victim of sorcery; in his relationship with the dead, there are also several possible motives to victimize him, independently of his exemplary conduct. For instance, if a saliva drip would fall from a senior kin's mouth while commenting on one of his actions, his ancestors would consider that event to be an invocation, and the words to be a request to correct him. It is also assumed that a spirit may demand compensation for a deceased kin's past action. Finally, a person may as well be afflicted not because of his actions or omissions, or even because of a guilt inheritance, but as a way to alert the real responsible for the fault – who will be, in this case, some close relative.

In short, several instances of determination are assumed in order to explain the relation between people and the harmful events (including human actions and reactions), but those instances interact in a permanently mutable and unexpected way, according to the changing possibilities, interpretations and aims available to each one of them, and according to their relational history. Therefore, this *domestication of aleatoriness* system is based on a deterministic structure, it seeks to explain and regulate uncertainty, however, its outcome is chaotic due to the complexity of the involved factors, unknowable in their totality and characterised by agency – just like in Eglash's suggestion.¹⁰

One of the consequences is that, like in the “western” *domestication of aleatoriness* system based in probabilistic risk, we face here an attempt to explain and to regulate the uncertainty that, due to the complexity of the involved factors, is not able to dominate it, turning prevention into a partial palliative (Granjo, 2004).

Another one is that, in this social context, divination is expected to detect (*a posteriori*) the subjacent reasons for the events, and to preview the backups and obstacles surrounding future projects, in order to allow accurate options, strategies and precautions; but it is not expected to reveal a sure or unchangeable future.

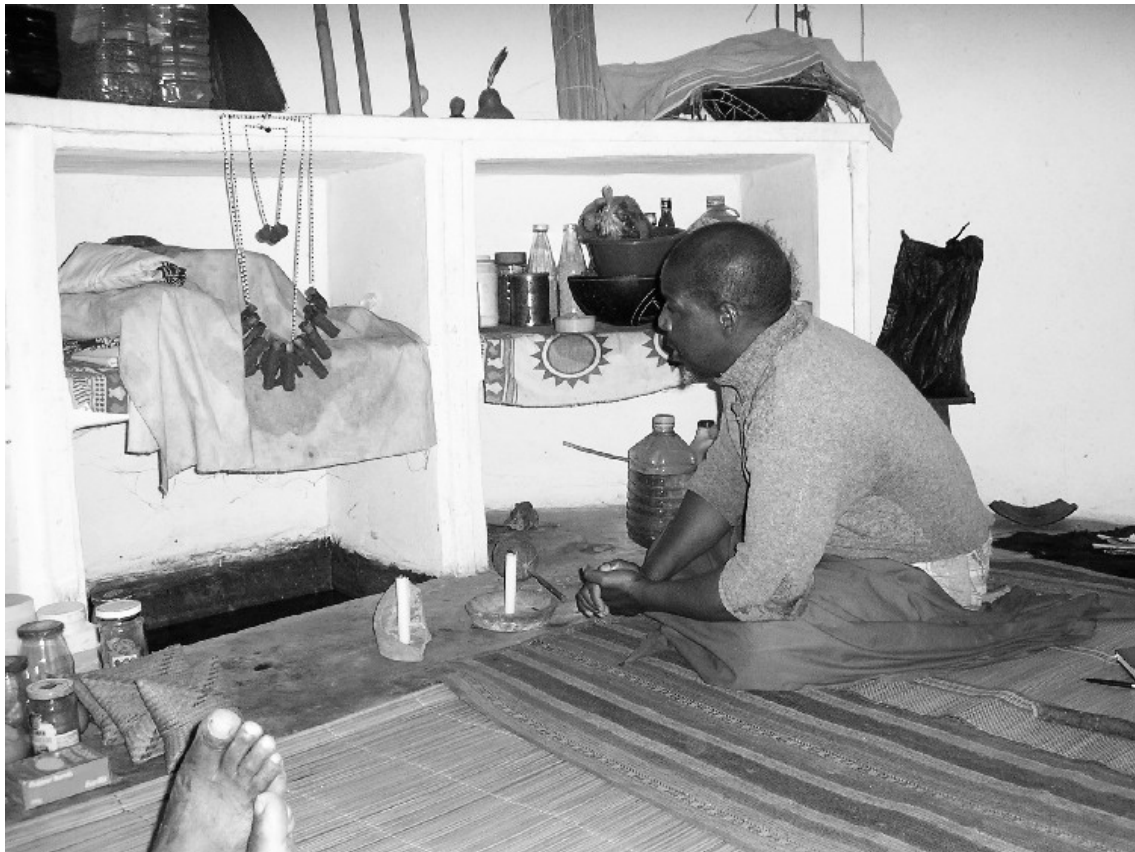
More important to the matter at hand it is, though, the fact that divination is not a purpose in itself, but it serves to provide a sense and to guide the action – and that is

¹⁰ To go deeper in this subject and its consequences, see Granjo (2007).

even more true to the diviner, who is as well a healer of illnesses and social problems,¹¹ and has in divination his/her means of diagnosis.

The consultation

Nevertheless, from the diviners' point of view the consultation is not only a matter of getting information, but as well a matter of gaining and keeping credibility amongst their clients. For that reason, their attitudes and particular style of *tinhlolo* reading change from diviner to diviner and from occasion to occasion, according to their level of confidence and their security strategies. The sequence of the events is, though, basically the same.



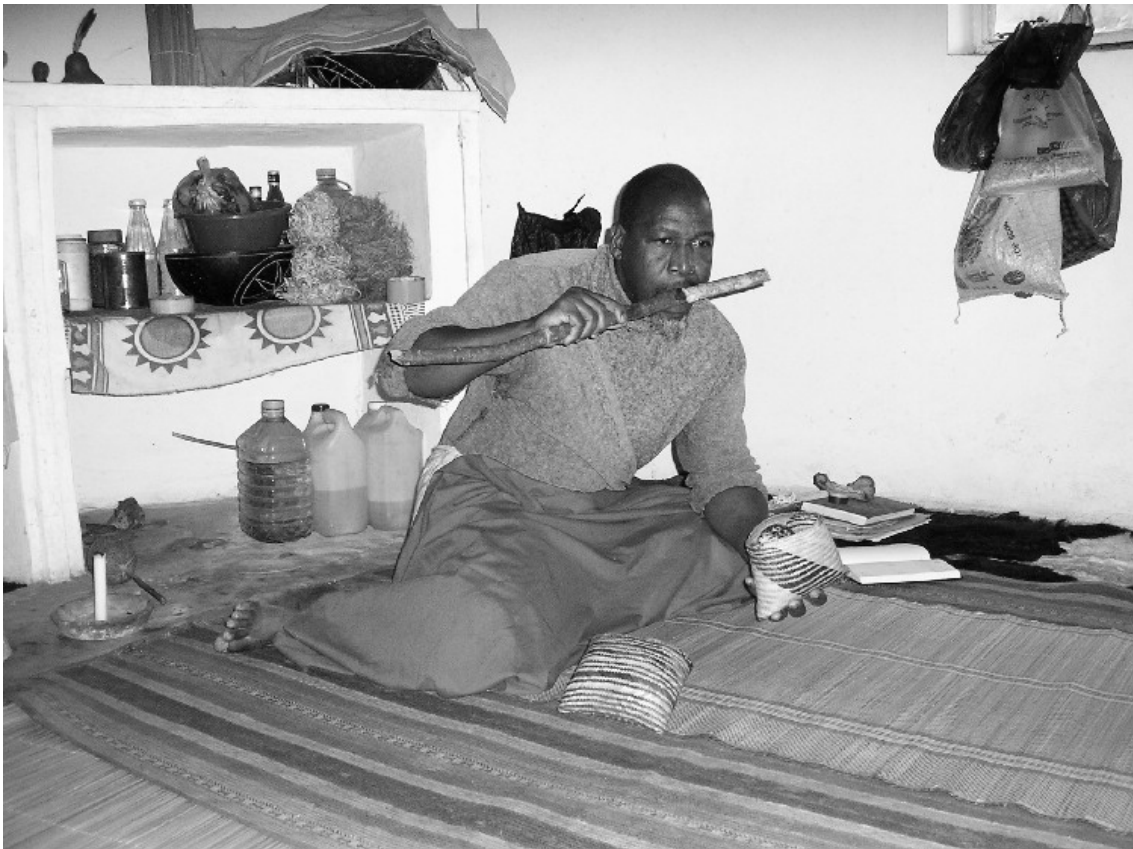
(image 4) Job Massingue, asking/calling one of his spirits to «work».¹²

¹¹ In fact, although several healers of my acquaintance are mostly sought for their special expertise to solve a specific kind of problem, an informal accounting of their clients' motives for consultation indicates that men mostly want to find a job, to solve professional problems, to overpass sexual impotency or to get girlfriends, while women mostly arrive because of infertility, of family problems, or in order to «fasten» (hold) their husbands. Non-reproductive health problems are, in urban and suburban contexts, less frequent as a reason for consultation - except for illnesses believed as being the object of healers' specific expertise, such as asthma, epilepsy or aphthas.

¹² The client was later reprehended for keeping the feet in this position, which is feared to block the consultation.

When the client arrives, he¹³ just asks for a consultation, without providing further specification as to his motives. Soon after, he will be invited to the hut belonging to the spirit who will lead the work in that day – because the healer must request them rotationally, or else some of them «*will get jealous, feeling that their work is despised*».

First, the diviner will dress that spirits' *capulana*, a local kind of textile which is usually rolled around the waist or used to carry babies at the loin, and which in the case of the spirits-owned ones have codified colours and patterns, according to their “ethnic” origins. Then, facing to that spirit's paraphernalia, the diviner will call him to work by saying that there is somebody who asks for their help (image 4). The spirit's agreement is essential, because without his active participation the diviner «*looks and just sees bones, he can't read anything*».



(image 5) Biting *manono* wood, to help «light trance».

After this invocation to the premises, a literate healer will take note, in his hospital-like registering book, of the client's official name, genealogy and «*traditional name*» - or, if he doesn't have one, his familiar nickname. In a country where many

¹³ Clients, diviners and spirits may be men or women. Nevertheless, I will use from now on just the masculine form (correspondent to the photos), in order to avoid systematic gender duplications.

people don't know how to read or aren't anymore able to write, this act - with obvious similitude to Medical Doctor's routine - is usually practiced with circumspection and some solemnity.

The spirit is then asked to make *kuvumbata* (prophecy) of the client, who is identified by his name and ascendant kin in the two or three later generations. Subsequently, the diviner bites a branch of *manono*, a very sour wood which helps him to induce what is usually called «*light trance*», or «*mild trance*» (image 5).

Used isolatedly, the word «*trance*» is indeed reserved for the cases when a spirit takes complete control of the person and his movements, and speaks through him. This state – which ordinary clients believe to make the person loose totally the contact with the outside world, but that several diviners present as a different perception in which they keep some basic notion of what is happening around them – is required in several ceremonies and for the most spectacular type of *kufemba* (exorcism) treatments. In the case we are facing, though, the spirits' incorporation is rather described as a «*shudder, and then like a light tissue over your shoulders*».



(image 6) Throwing the complete *tinhlolo*.

Once the diviner feels it, he can throw the *tinhlolo* (image 6). If patient is a regular client, the diviner may use only the “Nguni” set; if it is a first or an important consultation (due to the client's status or expected problem), he will normally «*play safe*» and throw the crocodile back scales and the *nulu* nut shells as well. The idea is to be able to compare the patterns they draw with those of the larger and more complex *tinhlolo*: for a good consultation, the three sets should give basically the same information; if they do not, something is wrong. Besides, the simpler six-piece sets can help the diviner to focus his attention on the most pertinent information, amongst the several reading lines which are provided by the larger set.

Prior to undertaking anything else, the diviner is supposed to identify the motive for a client's visit. If he fails to do so, the client will just take his money back and leave. For that reason, most diviners are very careful in this phase, speaking by metaphors or even «*singing the tinhlolo song*», a vague story about client's family and past that more or less fits most of the population and was learned with their masters. Then, according to their client's reactions, they progressively approach what they believe to be the issue.

The diviners' insecurity is legitimate, even by their own criteria. Indeed, besides the spirit's incorporation, a good consultation is believed to also require that the spirit will be in a good mood and that his interaction with the client's ancestors will be mutually accepted. So, even a good diviner can some times feel unsure or to be unable to provide true information; but, since his reputation is at stake, he will try to use his experience and observation abilities in order to arrive at the real issue.

If everything goes well, however, the situation is described in a different way. The interaction with the spirit is not, as they say, «*somebody blowing to your ears what to speak*», but like an internal orientation, like «*things that came to your mind*», «*thoughts that flow inside your head*». When the symbiosis between the diviners and their spirits it is very well achieved, and communication with the client's ancestors is established, then - they claim - the *tinhlolo* pieces become almost secondary and no further throws may be needed:

«When that happens, no worries cross my mind about whether I am right or wrong, convincing or not. After a moment, I don't even look at the “bones” anymore. The client thinks I'm looking and reading them, but I'm just talking, talking, talking, and without even noticing it I have already closed my eyes and I keep talking, talking, until I have no more to say. And when I shut up, normally there isn't really anything more to say, or to throw.»

Such situations, however, do not occur often. Commonly, the diviner will arrive at the problem, will explain its general reasons in a broadly metaphoric or a more direct way, according to his personal style and the confidence he feels (image 7), and will wait for the client's reaction and commentary.



(image 7) Explaining client's problem.

The diviner will then ask the client several pertinent questions, and his commentaries and answers will lead to another throw – this time, however, only the “Nguni” *tinhlolo* will be used, and it will be thrown from diviner's hands rather than from the straw bag where it is carried, as was done in the beginning. If this change in the throwing proceedings is systematic, we should nevertheless note that the bag, in itself, is not the object of any special concern. It's just a regular *sipatsi* bag bought in the market, as everybody else might buy as well, and if sometimes it presents complex colour patterns, its choice is only aesthetic. Not even the bag material is compulsory or presents any special meaning, according to diviners' accounts: «*We just buy what is for sale. Nowadays it's in straw, but my grandfather, for instance, did his own in leather.*»

This succession of diviner's affirmations, client's reactions, questions, answers and new throws can easily seem, to the observer's eyes, a therapeutic interaction which

also provides essential data to the diviner's interpretation and intervention. It is, however, the object of two parallel explanations amongst the diviners:

First, it is stated that, while the issues raised in a throw are not completely answered, subsequent throws will only repeat the same information, without adding anything new. This redundancy would arise from a main characteristic of the *tinhlolo*, as a medium of communication between the spirits and the living, and therefore subject to rules of common courtesy – as one must answer to a letter, or an oral message, before receiving new communications.

Secondly, it is believed that the spirits (especially if they are Nguni) do not work for very long. So, after they get tired, the diviner will have to mobilize his experience and observation abilities in order to complete the puzzle and the consultation – and, when he has to work this way, the things he says are not *kuvumbata* anymore, but «*a guess*», it does not matter how accurate it might be.

Independently of the accuracy and nature of the divination session, the client may still want, after several throws, direct answers for some doubts. If this happens, the questions he will ask cannot be dubious, and they must allow a binary answer – yes/no, dead/alive, etc. One of the six-piece set will then be thrown, from the diviner's hands. The choice of the set to be used (*tinguenha* or *thiakata*) will depend on the preferences of the spirit who is «*working*» in that particular day and time.

In the end of the process, one may notice that the divination conclusions are mostly presumed in the data confirmed by the client – as long as those data are interpreted according to the local *domestication of aleatory* point of view – and that an important part of the diviner's work is to make sense, in light of this, of those things the client had already known. The client, however, only confirmed what was asked to him and, in some diviners' cases, he received something like a lecture on how do local explanation principles work. Therefore, his consultation experience does not just provided him with a sense to his misfortunes and a plausible way (most often ritualistic) to overcome them, but has also reinforced and given him a better knowledge of cultural references which usually are, for him, fragmentary and vague notions. Additionally (in particular if the subject of the consultation is about family issues), the client may have heard some advises about his behaviour, based upon the diviner's idiosyncrasies on social relations and assumed by him as a part of his role as counsellor.

The objects status

In this context, what is, after all, the status of the divination set which brought together those two people and, allegedly, their spirits and ancestors? What is its power, if any? What is its ontological nature?

We could feel tempted to ascribe some anthropomorphic or zoomorphic nature to *tinhlolo*, when we recurrently hear people saying that «*it speaks*».

Obviously, such a sentence is not innocuous. Besides possible ontological speculations, a consequence of *tinholo*'s speaking ability is, for instance, the possibility of deceive it, since it is believed that all speaking entities may be deceived (Granjo, 2006) – and, in *tinhlolo* case, this possibility is explain by the contingency that client's ancestors do not accept diviner's spirits as interlocutors, or that some jealous and powerful colleague sent a spirit of his own to create confusion during the consultations.

But, when people say that the *tinhlolo* speaks, does this means that it speaks by itself or - as for the moon, the sun and the moonlight – it is just a mean to reflect others' speech? And what does *tinhlolo* needs in order to start speaking?

In a superficial glimpse, the last question could also lead us to the idea of a *tinhlolo* personhood. This divination set is, indeed, the object of a special preparation – or, we could say, a *rite de passage* (van Gennep 1978; Turner 1967) – in order to work:

When the diviner-to-be manages to acquire all the required pieces of the divination set, he must leave home before dawn and carefully hide near a crossroad, waiting for people to pass through. Every time somebody passes, he must throw away one of the *tinhlolo* pieces, saying its name while he does it. He may as well do a similar thing at a rubbish heap; in that case, he will not depend on passing people but he must throw away the pieces in all directions. In both variations, though, the future diviner must find the pieces after he threw them all away, grab them back and return to his spirits' hut. Once there, he will wash them with a blend of medicinal plants and, afterwards, he must take, together with the *tinhlolo* pieces, a kind of sauna in the steam of that same boiling liquid.

This later proceeding, called «*bath*» or «*breath*», is commonly used for several other purposes, such as the treatment of different illnesses, purification, protection or even exorcism, changing the boiling ingredients according to the desired effect. In the case of the *tinhlolo* preparation ritual, however, the meaning and purpose of the *bath* are evident to the involved people: it is all about «*to incorporate* [my emphasis] *the*

tinhlolo, *to make it your own*». This doesn't mean, however, that a diviner cannot work with a colleague's set. In a situation which reminds van Binsbergen's (2003) surprise when he discovered that his effective divination tablets were not yet consecrated, one can use somebody else's *tinhlolo* and be successful; the only problem is that, when a diviner does so, *«the consultation is more difficult»*.

This possibility of using somebody else's set, together with the increased difficulty of divination under such conditions, reinforces something that other data also suggest: even if the ontological importance of ritual nomination is very well known in general terms, including in the Mozambican area, the main issue involved in this particular case seems rather to be the basic need that both the diviner and his spirits have to clearly define which *tinhlolo* piece is which. I mean, this particular ritual nomination involves essentially a classification and a presentation for recognition (of objects which are metaphors assumed as such), but not really a transmission of life or essence. After the ritual, the objects can start working as an effective divination set, not because a new power is transmitted to them or a pre-existing power is recognised or activated through the ritual proceedings, but because it is henceforth assumed and known, by the diviner and by his spirits, the metaphoric meaning of every one of the objects.

Besides, one may ask whose *rite de passage* it is, after all.

If, as a result of this process, the objects cease being a bunch of separate items to become a *tinhlolo* set (through the diviner/spirits' nomination of each one of them), also the possessed person ceases being a divining potentiality to become somebody who is able to exercise his powers autonomously, without dependence from his master's paraphernalia.

Secondly, it is the diviner-to-be (and putatively the spirits who are part of his new being) who must divine where did fall down the pieces he throw away, and it is he (or, if we prefer, them) who must make the objects their own in order to better use them. Moreover, the searching demand which follows the throwing away of the *tinhlolo* pieces is parallel to the major happening on the diviner-healer's public "graduation examination": after he reaches trance, the candidate must find a sacrificed goat's organ and some ritual objects which were hidden by the examiner (Honwana 2002).

Finally, it is the diviner/spirits entity who needs to loose the pieces in order to definitively own the set and, even if the examples of one's incorporation into objects are countless since the *Essai sur le Don* (Mauss, 1988 [1924]), the incorporation process is

inverted here, and the relation between the diviner and his *tinhlolo* is plainly assumed as a property one.

Any remaining doubts will be, I believe, clarified by the exegesis produced by diviners, while confronted with this issue – because, ultimately, it is with social agents' representations and meanings ascription that we deal, when we deal with the subject of this article.

By hearing those exegesis and the metaphors which come along with them, we can notice that they systematically deny *tinhlolo* to have any power (or even agency) of itself. We could group those explanations about what *tinhlolo* is into six complementary and somewhat impressionistic categories:

First, *tinhlolo* is seen as an instrumental “perception amplifier”. From this point of view, it is just a tool which helps and reinforces the person's ability and power - as we could say, for instance, about a lever. The metaphors used by diviners are, however, focused on the perception abilities which are required by their profession.

One of such examples is the most spectacular kind of *kufemba*, or exorcism, performed with the help of an instrument called *tchova*, a gnu tail with some hyena tail hair in the handle (visible on the right side of the images 6 and 7, over the mat). In that proceeding, the healer reaches trance and smells the patient while passing the *tchova* over him, he captures the patient's afflicting spirit and let him speak through his body, in order to let him present himself, his complaints and demands. As a diviner said me, «*Tinhlolo is like the tchova in kufemba. It's true it must be a good one, with the [expensive] hyena tail hair, and all that. But it's just an instrument to help the detection, it doesn't detect anything and it doesn't tell me where to look for patient's spirits. My spirits guide me in that.*»

Another metaphoric example comes from the Medical Doctors' paraphernalia: «*It's like the stethoscope. It just makes things clearer, isn't it? It has no power of its own; the power belongs to those who use it. It's the doctor who must know the meaning of what he's listening to, and what he hears already exists without the stethoscope, it just helps. Tinhlolo is even more useful to us, because it's our stethoscope, our x-ray and our analyses all together.*»

In a second sense, *tinhlolo* is presented as an instrument to reinforce spirits' responsibility, as a way to focus them in their task. Indeed, spirits are considered volitive and capricious, and moreover a bit hedonistic. For instance, most of them are supposed to enjoy playing by the sea or in other beautiful places, and to be difficult to

call while they do it. Complementarily, one does not order the spirits to do anything; although it was them who first wanted to work, the diviner must remind them of their responsibilities every time he needs them to perform divination. So, *tinhlolo* is also «a way to call and to engage the spirit into the divination. When I grab it and I call them, they know I mean business, it's not for fun. Unless they are displeased with me, they must come and do that job; it was their choice in the first place, to make me become a healer.»

In another testimony, «when I first started, my spirits couldn't stand still. They wanted so much to work that I used to fell into trance some three times a week, just like that, while eating, while talking to somebody... During consultations, they often “came-out” [i.e., they spoke through the diviner's mouth] with no real need, just because they wanted to work so much and well. Now, they got used to it, so I need the **solemnity** [my emphasis] of *tinhlolo* to bring them to work and to focus in it.»

In a third complementary meaning, *tinhlolo* is presented as the starting point and the catalyser of a communication relation - the divination consultation. In this case, there is an implicit assumption of the consultation dynamics and it is underlined, as its essential value, the communication which is established between the diviner, his spirits, the client and his ancestors:

«In fact, *tinhlolo* it's just the starting engine, an initial orientation to spirits' kuvumbata [prophecy]. Afterwards, it's up to them to follow and to go deep into the issues.»

«A consultation is a letter of several pages, which need to be read and answered. *Tinhlolo* is the beginning of each page. Then, it's up to the client to answer it, so that my spirits and his ancestors can go further».

The nature of the *tinhlolo* participation in that communication process is the object of a fourth kind of metaphors: it delivers a codified and encrypted message.

«It's like the alphabet. Together, the pieces say things, but the divination of what they mean is the work and power of the spirit. If I try it all by myself, it's too complicated to understand.»

«*Tinhlolo* is like those old computer cards with holes. The information is there, but you have to decode it.»¹⁴

¹⁴ This unexpected metaphor comes from a previous engineer, who became familiar with those objects when he was a student, some 30 years ago.

Meanwhile, the spirits' essential role both in the decoding and in the whole divination process makes *tinhlolo* be presented as a kind of "playground" to them, as a set of objects that they enjoy to overpass and to define, showing who does own the power.

«In a very good consultation, I often know what tinhlolo will say, even before the pieces touch the mat. The spirits know it already. Tinhlolo helps, and helps me even more when things aren't so great; but those who divine are the spirits, and they show it, when they feel like it.»

«The pieces are just things that symbolise things. As far as me and the spirits know which is which, it works. Notice: I know a colleague, in the countryside, who just uses corn grains, and it works. She decided which one is which, she recognises them, her spirits recognise them... It's all you need.»

Finally, also the general local theories about the spirits' abilities and limitations emerge into the speech when *tinhlolo* nature is explained. It is, then, presented as a clear voice to the spirits: *«You already know, by now: spirits can only talk by "coming-out", by creating problems around or through tinhlolo. What really is tinhlolo? Tinhlolo is their mean to talk, the clearest and the easiest to everyone – because, I tell you, trance is hard.»*

So, some key aspects are recurrent and consensual, it does not matter from which point of view the *tinhlolo* and its nature are explained - each point of view corresponding, after all, to different facets of the divination process and of its subjacent theories.

First of all, it is consensual that the consultation will be a fake if the diviner stands alone, without the incorporation of a spirit.

Indeed, even for those who sustain that the way the *tinhlolo* pieces fall down is always directed by spirits, this kind of participation is not enough for a «true» reading. In a pragmatic local interpretation, a consultation without trance would always be fallible, even to a very experienced diviner, because the combinations between the pieces are *«far too complex to handle by yourself»*. From a more ideological¹⁵ point of view, though, that hypothesis does not even make any sense, since all the foresight is based in the knowledge of the diviner's spirits and the client's ancestors, and in the communication between them. Therefore, if the symbiotic communication line between

¹⁵ I do not use, here, ideology in the most common Marxist sense of "false conscience", but with the meaning of a situated and systemic model of perception and interpretation of the surrounding world.

the diviner and the spirits is not “open”, that knowledge cannot be transmitted to the livings, or understood by them.

A second consensual issue is that the objects which constitute *tinhlolo* do not have any power of their own.

They help to focus in the divination task, they help to clarify the diviner's perception, they allow the spirits to speak, they are the material base and the occasion for a communication relationship, but they are always considered instrumental in the process. They «*are things that symbolise things*», and therefore every one of them can be changed and substituted, as far as it is assumed which reality it does represents.

Being so, however, a new question must be raised: Why, then, do *tinhlolo* pieces fall that way, the right and true one, and not any other?

Face to this question, there is no longer a consensus between diviners - and any of them seemed to be convict that the answer he/she was given me was the correct one. Some diviners say, as I just mentioned, that the spirits guide the way the pieces fall down. In a major variation, one of them ascribed that task to the client's ancestors, although she never mentioned before an issue of such obvious hermeneutic importance, during our conversations. Most diviners, though, just say that this is the real mystery about *tinhlolo* and divination, a mystery that we can only speculate about, without much hope to find the truth.

Ideology and corporative protection

So, when we deal with *tinhlolo*, we are dealing with a set of objects which are considered merely instrumental in the divination process, which may fall down “the right way” by several unknown and possible reasons (including the influence of spirits, God or the universe), but which are supposed to require a spirits' participation in order to become readable and a communication media. Another point is also clear: diviners totally refuse the hypothesis that divining abilities might be latent in everybody, or even in few special people (as, for instance, themselves), and might be disclosed and used by those people independently of a spirits' possession.

This conceptual framework and this strong emphasis of spirits' role in divination turn, however, *tinhlolo* into a technology that can only be manipulated effectively by spirits-possessed people who learned how to use it – in other words, into a monopoly of the diviner-healers recognised as such, by their peers and by the society.

We must, thus, ask a last question: How much there is, in the diviners' explanations about *tinhlolo* effectiveness, of a deliberate affirmation of professional exclusivity to its use? How much does that explanation arises from their interpretation of the world, and how much does it arises from a corporative self-defence attitude?

The issue is not irrelevant, nor the answer direct.

For instance, in 2006 I presented to a colleague a group of diviner/healers, so she could debate their task and proceedings as “opinion makers” and “family advisers”. After an enlightening conversation, my curiosity about the differences in *tinhlolo* sets made me ask our host (Maria Macuácuá) to see the set she uses. In order to spot more easily the pieces that I did not knew yet, I took away the *tinguenha*, the *thiakata* and the larger cowrie. By doing so, I inadvertently reproduced the first diviners' action after they throw the *tinhlolo*, and the suddenly tense ambiance became even tenser while I kept on commenting the names of the pieces I could recognise. Subsequently, one of the diviners grabbed the *tinhlolo* and started a collective and unasked consultation about me (image 2, page 4).

Some consequences of that consultation were complex and important enough to make them become the object of another article. But, besides them, the situation I described also led to a large discussion, which I only could foresee through my conversations with the diviners who took part in it.

Basically, the matter in discussion was if whether or not I knew too much, and whether or not such “secrets” should be told to me, an outsider.

The first debatable issue was, however, which were the biggest secrets. Knowing the draft of an article where I explained the local interpretation of misfortune (Granjó 2007a), some diviners claimed that, once one understand those issues, one understand the main secret, and all the rest are less important things – an opinion which strongly surprised me.

The specific arguments about my putative knowledge on *tinhlolo*, meanwhile, were focused in the matters that we are dealing with, in this article. Although some respected diviners thought that I should not be teach (especially for free) about *tinhlolo* pieces and about how to read them, the majority claimed that it did not matter what I knew on the subject, because I could not start performing divination, since I was not spirits-possessed. Whatever I could learn would only allow me to understand the process, but that knowledge would be useless in practical terms, because that process only works with the participation of spirits – they said.

So, we can see that the access to knowledge about *tinhlolo* is a touchy issue, and it was still touchy after the reinforcement – by that unasked consultation – of the general belief that I am not spirits-possessed.

We should not be surprised about it. Even if most diviner-healers avoided as much as they could to embrace their profession (and even if it was a politically dangerous profession during the post-independence regime), it allows them, today, the access to a good income by local standards and, probably more important, to positions and situations of power that they would never reach otherwise. To spread the knowledge about their specific expertises can, thus, be seen as a threat to their power and finances, due to a potentially larger professional competition.

But corporative motivations were not absent, either, from the major opinions, which supported my access to knowledge assuming my spiritual inability to use it in practical terms. It is obvious that the emphasis on the spirits' essential importance is rooted in the local predominant understanding of the world, the society, the misfortune and the domestication of aleatoriness. We can even say that other interpretations of *tinhlolo* would be logically possible, but none would be so systematically coherent with that world view. Nevertheless, to emphasise the spirits' role in divination and healing is not just an ideological matter, in nowadays Mozambique.

Indeed, that point is the main obstacle to the full recognition of healers, in their dialogue with the State and the biomedicine. The latter tend to only admit healers' botanic knowledge and biochemics ability to cure, considering all ritual or spiritual concepts and practices as a magma of superstition that should be eradicated in order to accept them as respectable healing partners. Diviner-healers, in the other hand, assume collectively the strategic aim of being included in a global and integrated health care system, but they consider their healing abilities inseparable from the action of their spirits – whose agreement, they say, can even be necessary to the success of treatments with medicines of recognised chemical efficacy. Being so, if the State and the biomedicine would only recognise their biochemical resources, this would be, from healers' point of view, ineffective, absurd and unacceptable.

In a way, we can thus say that the current emphasis on spirits' role in divination (and in cure) is both an affair of ideology and of corporative protection. But, it does not matter if we talk about *tinhlolo* or about the healing profession in general, that issue has a larger scope: it is a key point in a confrontation between two different systems of knowledge that – at least from healers' position – does not have by purpose to vanquish the opponent, but to achieve an

acceptable common ground and mutual respect, departing from power relations highly asymmetric. Under such conditions of negotiation and aims, the only thing we can seriously say about the future of both the *tinhlolo* and the status of the objects, people and spirits involved is that the potential for changes is high. In which direction changes may happen – reinforcement of the peoples', objects or even spirits' role – it is not at all clear.

Therefore, maybe in 10 or 20 years this article will not correspond anymore to the truth, according to diviners' point of view. Or maybe they will be even stricter about the points I presented.

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