

## Chapter 4: Yamba Spider Divination

### Introduction

Paul Gebauer, a Baptist missionary who worked among the Yamba in the second half of the 1930s, observed that ‘the social life of this group seemed largely controlled by a system of divination which engaged the West African earth spider’ (1964: Preface). His observations led him to make a study, which resulted in the monograph *Spider Divination in the Cameroons* (1964). In this, having revisited Western Yamba many years later, he wrote that ‘the system of divination, like its spider, has gone underground ... the clientele of old is no more. The present generation tries to solve its anxieties in new and various ways.’

Having worked in the same area and among the same people since 1985, I cannot confirm Gebauer’s statement. Far from having ‘gone underground’, spider divination and other divination practices are very much alive. In the following pages I want to take issue with several statements made by Gebauer in *Spider Divination in the Cameroons* and to record my own findings about Yamba spider divination. I rely on evidence gathered, over a period of three years, during a series of conversations with Pa Monday Kongnjo of Gom, a widely acclaimed diviner. This chapter is my attempt to understand or, more exactly, how Pa Monday has tried to explain the system of Yamba spider divination to me.

My other informants were Pa Garba of Ngang, a quarter of Rom village, Pa Benjamin Dung of Nkot, late Pa Taabi, a Mambila man from Lip just across the Cameroon-Nigeria border who lived and divined in the Yamba area, and Nsangong of Mfe. All of them were practising diviners, yet none was a ‘professional’ diviner making a living from divination. Pa Taabi came closest to professionalism in this sense, but he was not only a diviner practising several types of divination but also a *nga ncəp* (a healer and medicine man).

*ŋgam* is the general name for any kind of divination, but it can also mean ‘spider’ and the set of leaf-cards used in divination, while *nga fye ŋgam* is the diviner. To indicate the different types of divination one has to distinguish between *ŋgam se* (‘divination ground’), which is spider divination, and *ŋgam bo* (‘divination hand’), which is hand divination.

## 2. Gebauer's Spider Divination in the Cameroons Revisited

Gebauer has done remarkable work, especially on the arts of Cameroon (see Bascom *et al.* 1953; Gebauer 1979). His photo collection, now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is also of great interest and importance. His monograph *Spider Divination in the Cameroons* 'is the definitive work on the meaning of cards' (Zeitlyn 1987: 27). However, some of his claims cannot be confirmed and need revision. Also, as Zeitlyn has pointed out, the book 'is sadly uninformative when it comes to details of the process of interpretation' (*ibid.*). My criticism goes deeper. First, Gebauer fails to make a clear distinction between *ngam bo* (hand divination) and *ngam se* (spider divination). He writes (1964: 38, my emphasis):

The diviner has *the choice* of operating *the set of cards by himself*, the most common practice, *or of using a spider* to manipulate the cards, a method used in cases of great importance.

However, *ngam bo* and *ngam se* are two completely separate methods of divination and are never combined. There are many diviners who know only one of the two methods. Each method has its own distinct set of leaf-cards. The *ngam bo* set is never used in the *ngam se* method nor the other way round. All my informants were emphatic on this point. Thus Plates XIV and XV ('spider in action')<sup>23</sup> and the cover photo of Gebauer's books are misleading. They show *ngam bo* leaf-cards in the spider enclosure, a practice which is never employed. Although the book is entitled *Spider Divination in the Cameroons* the cards illustrated in the book are all *ngam bo* cards. Indeed, *ngam se* cards do not feature in the book at all.

Let us consider some of the differences between *ngam bo* and *ngam se* leaf-cards. The cards of *ngam se* are larger in size than those of *ngam bo*. The cards in a *ngam se* set are much fewer in number. The sets in my possession and the ones I have examined number between seventy and one hundred. A *ngam bo* set has two hundred or more cards. Different kinds of leaves are used in making the cards of the two sets. The leaf used to make *ngam se* cards has a rough, coarse texture; the midrib runs right through the middle of the card. The leaf used to make *ngam bo* cards is as large as a man's hand and feels silky and smooth to the touch; several cards can be cut out of one leaf. Also, *ngam bo* and *ngam se* cards are stored in different fashions. *ngam bo* cards are stored in a bamboo container, as shown by Gebauer (1964: 37), whereas *ngam se* cards are stored pressed between a pair of tongs made of a bent-over piece

23. The plates showing the 'Spider in action' (Gebauer 1964: 44), including the photo on the front cover, are 'records of experimentation' (cf. footnote on page 141).

of bamboo. The bamboo container in which the *ngam bo* is kept contains other things used in this type of divination, namely the tail of a squirrel, porcupine quills and some red feathers (*ngu*), while the *ngam se* set lacks any such paraphernalia. *ngam se* cards are made in pairs. Each positive or ‘good’ card corresponds to a negative or ‘bad’ card. There are no empty cards. *ngam bo* cards are in pairs or in sets of four. The pairs are positive and negative, as in *ngam se*. The sets of four are male-positive, male-negative, female-positive, female-negative. Neither set has single or neutral cards. *ngam bo* sets have a number of ‘empty’ cards.

Secondly, it is true that ‘diviners do not attempt to file the cards into categories of interest or groups having similar symbolised meanings’ (Gebauer 1964: 36). But according to my informants, it is not correct that diviners observe ‘one single rule, that tops must join tops, and bottoms join bottoms’. In both divination methods, *ngam bo* and *ngam se*, the positive cards are put together in a pile and the negative ones piled in the same way. The two piles are then placed one on top of the other, thus forming a single stack.

I have, however, met one diviner who does not follow this rule. He is Pa Benjamin Dung of Nkot, a village in western Yamba. But he does not use the Yamba system of *ngam se*. He learnt divination from a diviner in Mbat, a village in the Mfumte area. His set of leaf-cards is strikingly similar to the one pictured in Plate XVI (‘The Manang Diviner’) in Gebauer’s book (ibid.: 47).<sup>24</sup> Manang is another village in the Mfumte area, quite near to Mbat. Pa Benjamin told me that he just empties the whole bamboo box containing the cards on top of the spider hole without arranging them in any way. The spider will do the arranging itself, he said.

The third major point where Gebauer is incorrect concerns the sticks, which are pinned into the ground around the spider hole when divining. He writes (ibid.: 43, my emphasis):

To *speed up* the method of divination, the diviner *may* place inside the enclosure short pieces of grass, or he may draw lines from the centre of the enclosed ground to the edge of the enclosure.

As will be shown later, these sticks, which represent different persons, groups of persons or places, are an essential part of Yamba spider divination. Without them, spider divination is impossible.

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24. Gebauer failed to recognize this as a *ngam se* set (albeit a non-Yamba one). This led him to the mistaken ‘first impression’ that the set was ‘a crude imitation of the real thing seen fleetingly by the imitator!’ (1964: 139).

Gebauer documented a number of other divination types practiced by the ‘Kaka’ (ibid.: 30), viz. sortilege, casting of millet seeds, augury, haruspication and autopsy. It is difficult to say whether all these types were practiced by the Yamba. When talking about ‘Kaka’, Gebauer includes among the Yamba villages like Kwaja and Manang, which are clearly not Yamba but Mfumte villages. The confusion is understandable when one realizes that almost up to the 1940s, the Yamba and Mfumte areas were collectively known by the common name of ‘Kaka’. When I tried to find out whether augury or haruspication was practiced in Yamba I usually got blank stares. Plate IV (ibid.: 32), subtitled ‘Augury by observation of bird images’, shows bird effigies used in the annual *cam* dance. These effigies are of two kinds, those in which the body is made of a calabash called *mvə’ cam* and those carved in wood called *bubak cam*. They hang suspended from a rope, which surrounds the enclosure (*dzok cam*) where the dancers smear their bodies with a white chalky substance before the dance. The dancers dangle these effigies from their hands on a short string when dancing. That they were used in a type of divination (augury) could not be confirmed.

I suspect that augury and haruspication are indeed practiced in the Mfumte villages but I have had no opportunity to find out. Autopsy, which used to be carried out on every dead person before burial, except small children, has been outlawed and is no longer practiced.

The divination practices I found among the Yamba are the two mentioned above, namely *ngam se* and *ngam bo*. Both are widely used, *ngam bo* being more common in upper Yamba than in the valleys to the west or north. *ngam se* is believed to be the most reliable and most trustworthy of all the divination types. It does not lie, they say. *Majara* (*ma-ja’tə*) is also very common. Segments of the wild garden-egg (*Solanum sp.*) are used in this divination practice. I was told that *majara* (*ma-ja’tə*) divination was used by hunters in their hunting rituals, as was another type, namely the throwing of seeds of malagueta pepper on the surface of water or of palm wine in a cup.

In Ngang, a quarter of Rom village, I met an old diviner, Pa Usumanu. His own divination device consisted of a large number of calabash discs, bones, pebbles, claws, beads, small horns, etc., kept in a calabash. When divining, he placed a cowhide on the ground. He then poured the contents of the calabash into a calabash bowl and, swaying the bowl to and fro several times, he emptied part of the devices on the skin in a forward motion. The pieces that fell furthest away towards a pile containing red feathers (*nggu’*), porcupine quills, the fang of a leopard, the foot of a hawk, a large crystal, the claw of a crab and the jaw-bone of a snake are read and interpreted. Pa Usumanu was kind

enough to give me a demonstration after I had given him a few coins with which he tapped on the calabash to ‘wake up *ngam*’.

Besides these general types of divination, there are others, which are specific to a rite or activity. In Mfe, for example, before a community hunt, the lineage head will perform a rite (‘sharpening of spears’) at the family hunting shrine called *dzok si* (literally ‘the place of the face’, i.e. where the ‘face’ of the hunter is ‘cleansed’). At the end of the rite, as we saw earlier (Chapter 3), the lineage head will call each hunter separately; he will find out through a sort of divination whether somebody has made a ‘mistake’ — for example, by having broken a taboo or otherwise transgressed. The lineage head will take two elephant-grass stalks and chip off a piece from each stalk. If both of the chips fall face down or face up everything is fine. If, however, one of the chips falls face up and the other face down the big man has to ‘cleanse’ the hunter, otherwise there is a danger that an accident will happen during the hunt. Other divinatory practices are specific to rites such as that performed at the end of rituals to find out whether the rite had been successful and had achieved its aim.

The commonest reasons for divining are sickness and death. In an area where medical facilities are few and far between, so that patients have to be carried on stretchers or on people’s backs for many hours up and down steep hills, where hospital bills, especially if they involve an operation, are astronomical relative to the means of ordinary people and can throw them into debt for many years, it is understandable that a father or lineage head will first consult *ngam* before any action is taken. Should the patient die despite having been taken to the hospital, all the trouble and expense will have been for nothing. My heart missed a beat when Pa Benjamin of Nkot told me that he always divines first to decide whether to take a sick member of his family to the hospital or not. If *ngam* reveals that the patient will die even if taken to hospital nobody will move a finger. But the underlying reasons are deeper. In the people’s view, sickness can be caused by a number of things: witchcraft, the anger of one’s in-laws, the breaking of a taboo or one’s oath, ‘supernatural pollution’ caused by the transgression by the patient or a near relative, breaches of the law of a secret society (especially *ɲwantap*), etc. In any of these cases, the cause of the sickness must first be detected before treatment, even ‘white man medicine’, can be successful. Divination reveals the ultimate cause of the sickness which in turn determines the action to be taken, very often a cleansing ritual called ‘sprinkling of cool water’ (*təm nɛp*) by the head of the *ɲwantap* society.

Other reasons for consulting *ngam* are accidents, crop failure, or failure in business, theft, barrenness, suspected witchcraft, selection of a new chief, going on a journey, and many other circumstances.

### 3. Yamba Spider Divination

I will now turn to Yamba spider divination (*ngam se*) proper. As I have already mentioned, *ngam se* is commonly believed to be the most reliable of all the divination practices. 'It does not tell a lie'. My present task will be mainly descriptive. The spider myth will serve as a starting point.

#### 3.1. The spider myth

Roger Moss has recorded one version of the spider myth in a manuscript entitled 'Mbem: Six Months in the Cameroons' (among other titles), written in the early 1960s. I give here a slightly different and fuller version of the myth, as told to me by Pa Monday:

Once upon a time people went hunting. Then game was in abundance. One young man went to his *tɛ'tsə* [MF] to beg for a spear so that he could join the hunt. His *tɛ'tsə* gave him a spear saying, 'Yes, my *monje*, go and shoot me an animal.' The young man took the spear and joined the hunt. As he went, a big antelope suddenly jumped out of the bush in front of him. He threw the spear and hit the animal. The antelope ran off with the spear stuck in its side. The young man and other hunters followed it. They followed it a great distance until they came to a hill where the antelope disappeared. They searched everywhere but could not find it. They were at their wits' end. They had followed the animal's footprints and the traces of blood. The hunters gave up and returned to their village.

Next morning, the young man went to his *tɛ'tsə* to report the loss of his spear. He told him how he had shot an antelope and how the antelope had run off with his spear. Everybody agreed that he had shot the antelope. They all had gone in search of it but could not find it. The young man's *tɛ'tsə* went to consult the spider. (In those times, the spider, when called, would come out of its hole and speak to people in their own language.) He called the spider. It came out and having listened to the man's report said that the young man should put it on his head and cover it with his cap. It would show him the place where the spear was. The young man did as the spider advised. So off they went! They came to the hill where the antelope had disappeared. There was a huge sod of grass standing there. The spider told him to remove it. He pulled it up and there saw the opening of a hole like a tunnel, which went far into the ground. The spider said, 'Do you see the blood?' He saw it. He jumped down into the hole and went into the tunnel. After some time they reached a 'kitchen'.<sup>25</sup> The spider said, 'Look, there is your spear!' He saw it. It was leaning against one of the corner

poles supporting the roof of the 'kitchen'. The tip of the spear was still bloodstained. The 'father' of the antelope had removed the spear from the animal. He had treated the wound with medicine and sealed it. He had also given the antelope some medicine to drink. The animal was healed there and then.

When the young hunter arrived at the 'kitchen', he saw people sitting there. They were surprised and asked him, 'Where do you come from?' 'I come from up there', he said. 'What business brings you here?' they asked. 'I have come to look for my spear. I shot at an antelope and it ran off with my spear.' 'Who has shown you the way?' they asked. 'I know the way', he replied. 'Who has shown you the way?' they asked again. 'I know the way', he repeated. Then they asked, 'Have you seen the spear?' He said, 'Yes'. 'Where is it?' 'That's the one', he said, pointing to the spear. The old man got up, took the spear and gave it to him. 'Take it and go!' The young man took the spear and left. He went back the way he came. He went and went, and suddenly found himself back at the very 'kitchen'. The old man asked, 'How? Have you come again?' The hunter replied, 'I went the same way I came. I'm sure it was the correct way. But when I looked up I saw that I was right back here'. The old man said, 'Go!' Off he went again. He went and went — only to find himself back at the 'kitchen' again. They said, 'Is it you again?' He said, 'Yes, sir! I thought I followed the same way I came but instead of getting to the exit I'm back here again.' 'Did you not say you knew the way? How come you cannot find the exit?' they asked. At this the old man got up and moved the cap from the young man's head. Down fell the spider! 'Oh!' exclaimed the old man, 'You, this thing, did I not tell you to show some "sense" to the people up there? I did not tell you to come and show them to me! Why did you show this man to me? You will no longer be able to speak to the people by word of mouth. When they ask you, you may show them only in a "hidden way".' The old man took some earth and threw it on the spider's back. From that moment on the spider was no longer able to speak to people in their language. Now, when people come to consult the spider, it can only communicate with them through a set of leaf-cards. The old man told the hunter to go. He left and was soon at the exit. He climbed out of the hole and replaced the sod of grass. Then he went home.'

I asked Pa Monday who these people in the 'kitchen', deep down in the ground, were. He replied, 'Are they not gods? They are gods. They are there now. Who can see them?'

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25. A 'kitchen' is an open shed with a loft found near compounds or in the farms or palm bushes where Yamba people produce palm oil, shelter from rain or rest from farm work. The sacra of secret societies are nowadays often kept in the lofts and family meetings are held there. Thus Pa Monday uses the word 'kitchen' and the 'people of his lineage' synonymously.

One thing which the myth seems to bring out clearly is that the spider is not seen as an envoy or messenger of the ancestors by Yamba but acts on its own, having an independent intelligence. *ngam* has been given the task of showing 'sense' to people, of revealing hidden things to them. More discussion on what or who the spider is believed to be will follow later on.

### 3.2. Learning spider divination

As already mentioned, my main informant was Pa Monday Kongnjo of Sang quarter in Gom village. He learned spider divination from an old diviner in his village, Damu Monkpu, when he was a young man and not yet married. When his sister Dzefarum, who was married to the chief of Nkwi, another quarter of Gom, fell seriously ill, he went to consult the diviner Monkpu on her behalf. The verdict of the divination and the recommended line of treatment to follow in order that his sister would recover (which she did) so impressed Pa Monday that he decided to learn spider divination himself.

According to Pa Monday, anybody can learn spider divination (except women because 'woman he know he own na whatti? Woman no fit savy palaver for that one!'). Unlike Mambila spider divination (Zeitlyn 1987:3) there is no formal initiation and no 'cooking and eating of a chicken by the teacher and pupil in the presence of at least one witness'. The important thing is to get to know the names and meanings of the leaf-cards thoroughly and to learn the interpretation process, which can only be done through repeated observation of actual divinations. During the time of apprenticeship the pupil is also taught how to make his own set of divination cards. There is no need for the pupil to have special gifts, like the gift of 'two eyes' (clairvoyance), nor does he have to experience spirit possession (Gebauer 1964: 29). Pa Monday clearly demythologizes Gebauer's statements:

Any man who learns it can do it. He must learn it, go into it deeply till he knows it well. Then he can do it. Because my own [method of divination] has nothing to do with witchcraft. It is a thing [which is done] in broad daylight. It is like going to school. If you study well, will you not succeed? It is the same with my own divination.

Like any apprentice learning a profession, the pupil of divination has to make payments to his master. These payments include money, fowls, small pots of cooked game and 'plenty mimbo' (a lot of palm wine). In Nkot I was told that the pupil has to kill a squirrel and bring it to the master as part of his payment, otherwise he will not be successful in his divination. Pa Monday dismisses this, saying he was not asked to do so and yet he is a very successful diviner. When the master is satisfied that the pupil knows the cards well and can mas-

ter the intricate and at first confusing process of interpretation, he will ask for a final payment, which in the case of Pa Monday was £ 3. From then onwards he may start divining on his own and try to establish his own name as a diviner. There is no society of diviners, according to my informants, nor do diviners enter ‘the secret society of *mbir*’, a society whose existence in Yamba I have so far been unable to trace (cf. Gebauer 1964: 29).

To be a successful diviner, one must be well versed in, and have deep insight into, the social order of Yamba society, their cosmology and beliefs, their fears and hopes. For me, the study of the symbols of the cards served like a door to the understanding of Yamba society. Junod (1913) said that the divination devices of the Thonga are ‘a résumé of their whole social order, of all their institutions’; this also holds true for the Yamba divination set.

In my opinion, too much emphasis is often laid on the need and ability of the diviner to gain a good insight into the client’s family background, his relationship with his in-laws, his occupation and health, etc. I do not deny that this can be helpful, but it is certainly not a *sine qua non*. To stress the necessity of gaining a good insight into the client’s life and those he may suspect is to reduce the Yamba spider diviner to a shrewd psychologist who is trying to confirm his client’s suspicions. The spider diviner is first and foremost, if not exclusively an interpreter (Nicod 1950: 153). It is not he who gives the verdict. He only interprets what the spider has shown him through the leaf-cards. Pa Monday could get quite vexed if a client objected to something or other he said. On one occasion he snapped: ‘Is it me who is telling you this? Is it not rather *ngam* which is telling you these things? I only tell you the things I see!’ (observed divination, 16 July 1991). For the Yamba spider diviner, divination is an intellectual activity which a knowledgeable observer can follow. The scrupulous study of the configuration of the leaf-cards scattered by the spider shows the concern of the diviner to be faithful to what he sees. At the back of his mind looms the fear that if he is not truthful the spider will punish him. ‘It will take its hand and lock my eyes so that I will not be able to see anything good again’, Pa Monday told me. There is nothing that would point to a direct or special relation between the diviner and some occult force or the source of truth, the spider. Yamba spider divination clearly belongs to the ‘artificial’ or, as it is also called, ‘mechanical’ type of divination (Zeitlyn 1987: 23).

### 3.3. The spider

The spider used in *ngam se* divination has been identified by Gebauer as the West African earth spider (*Heteroscoda crassipes*) of the Mygalidae family (1964:42). Divination using the land crab as recorded by Zeitlyn (1987: 6) for

the Mambila is not practiced by the Yamba as far as my information goes. Pa Monday told me that he had heard about this practice but had never tried it. Earth spiders are quite common and are often found near compounds, along footpaths or in the farms. Once in Nkot I was walking along the path from the Government School up to the Catholic Mission with Pa Monday. Always alert and on the look-out for the most important 'device' of his divination practice, he pointed out two spider holes to me just next to the footpath, which he promptly engaged on the same evening.

The practice of digging out a spider and bringing it nearer home is known but not often done. The diviner knows the spider holes in the vicinity of his compound and will use those if a client comes to him. When he is called to a different quarter or village, the people who called him will show him a spider hole. Women working in the farms, wine tappers and men going to the bush to cut palm nuts invariably see spider holes and will make a mental note of them in case they are needed. The practice of training spiders (Gebauer 1964: 140) could not be confirmed.

Gebauer (ibid.: 42) states that a person who willfully or accidentally killed a spider was formerly put to death. This could not be confirmed. Pa Monday and Pa Benjamin told me that only a mentally deranged person would kill a spider willfully and if somebody kills one accidentally, like a woman hoeing in the farm, nothing happens. There is much less mystery, 'sacredness' and awe surrounding the spider in Yambaland than Gebauer might lead us to believe.

There is a difference of opinion about which of the inhabited spider holes are eligible for spider divination. Nsangong of Mfe and Pa Taabi said that one should not engage a spider the entrance of whose hole points westwards. Elias Taabi and Pa Adamu of Ngang agree, explaining that such holes are inhabited by female spiders, which are unreliable. Pa Monday again dismisses such claims in his blunt way as nonsense.

### **3.4 The *ngam se* divination set**

Much has already been said about the *ngam se* leaf-cards (see above), but it is necessary to add some more information. The sets in my possession and those I have had a chance to examine or trace in my notebook show a number of differences between them. No one set was exactly like any other, except for those of a master and his former pupils. In general, one can say that the differences increase with the distance between villages. For example, the number of cards in a set varies. Pa Monday's set has eighty, Pa Garba's seventy-four

and Pa Taabi's one hundred cards. Also the size and shape of the cards in the different sets are not identical. Pa Garba's set, the most irregular as regards size and shape, shows some interesting features. In some cases the card is the symbol, unlike most of the cards, which are marked by incision. For instance, the card 'marriage shovel' is shaped in the form of the shovel which was used in the payment of bridewealth. The card symbolizing 'death drum' is also shaped in the form of the drum used at funeral celebrations. Some are composite cards. The card symbolizing 'a bag of salt' has a piece of leaf sewn on top of another with a thread taken from the salt bag. The card symbolizing 'man's bag' has a small piece of leaf sewn on the upper left-hand side with a thin string of raffia fibre, the material that is used to weave such bags. The card symbolizing 'letter' has been cut out of an old tax-ticket. The majority of the cards can, with a bit of experience, be recognized in all the sets, although the design of the symbols may vary to a greater or lesser degree. But there are some symbols, which are so completely different that they cannot be recognized without one's being told what they represent. Another difference lies in the fact that some symbols found in one set are absent from another. Space does not allow me to make a detailed comparison between the different sets.

All the sets I examined were incomplete. This may be surprising. Before examining a diviner's set of cards I asked him whether it was true that the cards were made in positive-negative pairs — in other words, whether it was true that each card 'get e own brother?' They all agreed that it was so. When I laid out the cards in pairs on a mat or a table, I invariably found that some of the pairs were incomplete. When I pointed this out to the diviners they readily admitted that it was true but that they had not been aware of it.<sup>26</sup> All made a mental note of the missing cards and said that they were going to replace them. When I asked how cards could go missing, I was told that it sometimes happens that the spider pulls a card right down into its hole so that it cannot be seen. But more often it is due to termites, which may eat some of the cards, while they are lying in the enclosure during the night. On the other hand, Pa Monday seemed not too worried about the missing cards (although he did replace them) and told me that it really does not matter. The spider can communicate its verdict even when the set is incomplete. But he admitted that it was not the correct thing to do. If the diviner notices that his set is incomplete, he should replace the missing cards.

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26. If one takes the trouble to arrange the *ngam bo* cards illustrated in Gebauer (1964) in pairs and sets of four, one will notice that the 'Makai set' is also incomplete.

Another point of interest is that Pa Monday divines with a set of cards not made in the usual way, i.e. cut out of the leaves of a certain forest tree (unidentified), but cut out of plastic material or imitation leather used in upholstery or for the lining of the inside of a car. He told me that he was fed up with always having to replace cards eaten by termites.

### 3.5. Setting the sticks (*titu'*)

When the diviner wants to divine on his own behalf or for a client, he will go to the spider hole and clean its surroundings, removing all dirt and every bit of grass growing there. If the hole is on a slope he will cut away the ground above and place it below the hole, thus making a level surface around the hole, taking great care not to disturb the entrance to the hole. Before proceeding to the hole, the client will already have put his problem to the diviner. After preparing the site the diviner's next task will be to decide which sticks (*titu'*) to pin into the ground around the hole. He will do this in consultation with the client. Drawing on his wide experience, the beliefs of the people, and, in the case of sickness or death, the possible causes (see above), he will suggest the likely culprits to the client. The sticks are about ten cm in length and are marked in such a way that they can easily be recognized. For example, a straight single twig, a forked twig, a twig with a leaf on it or a small leaf is placed on the ground and a twig pinned through it, etc. The sticks form a circle or semi-circle around the spider hole, spaced about ten to fifteen cm apart and about the same distance from the hole. Each stick stands for a person, group of persons or place as the case may be. Here are two examples, which I have observed:

Case 1: One day Pa Monday left Sabongari and went up to Nwa, a trek taking five hours. There he fell suddenly ill. He collapsed on the road and unluckily fell on a stone, cracking two of his ribs. After recovering, he wanted to find out who was responsible for having 'bewitched' him, i.e. having brought this sudden illness on him. The following sticks were placed in the ground:

- The people of Sabongari: had he done anything to them so that they were angry and had 'bewitched' him?
- The people of Nwa (same reason)?
- His 'kitchen', i.e. his own family people at Gom?
- His muyu (in-laws) in Gom?
- Pa Monday himself (was it his own fault)?
- His wife and children staying in Small Kimi (were they in danger too)?

In all, six sticks were placed round the spider hole.

Case 2: Two of Pa Monday's dogs, which he had bought in Sabongari and was trying to sell in Nkot, ran away frightened by a mighty thunderclap when lightning struck nearby. Where have the dogs gone to? There were three possibilities:

- Nkot. Are they still in Nkot?
- Gom. Have they gone to Gom, where Pa Monday had been staying with them for more than a week?
- Sabongari. Have they run back to their place of origin?

These two examples should make it clear that the placing of sticks is an essential part of Yamba spider divination.

In serious cases, sticks may be 'charged'. When a child dies or a person falls seriously ill and the father wants to find out who the guilty party is, he may cut the sticks and then touch them to the head of the dead child or of the sick person before pinning them around the spider hole. No satisfactory explanation for this practice could be elicited. In the case of theft, the suspected or accused parties may be asked to pin their own stick by themselves. The most likely reason for this is that the accused persons are present at the divination and witness the outcome themselves.

### 3.6. Putting the case to the spider

Next, the diviner will put the case to the spider. Kneeling down in front of the spider hole, with his head about a foot away from it, he will address the spider: '*ta-nwi, ta-nwi, cep me wa, cep me wa...*' (Papa God, Papa God, tell me, tell me...). The spider is addressed as God. Usually, the simple form '*nwi, nwi*' (God, God) is used. When I asked Pa Monday whether it was not more correct to call the spider a 'messenger of God' rather than addressing it as God, he was hesitant:

If you don't call it [the spider] 'God, God, God' — what else [can it be]? God exists! Are they not both one? Yes, call it God. If God and it exist, He tells it, 'go and talk like this' — who can know that?

This statement of Pa Monday is interesting because, according to Chilver, one comes across this uncertainty about the meaning of *nwi* elsewhere (personal communication; cf. Emonts 1927: 154). It is, one might say, not so much uncertainty but a question of immanence rather than transcendence. This suggestion is further strengthened by the following statement of Pa Monday:

There is a law, a serious law, which says: you must never watch the spider when it is busy selecting and pushing around the leaf-cards. If your eyes

see it you are gone! You will die. You will die just like that without being sick. You must never go and watch the spider at work. Never, never!

God is invisible and must remain invisible. If the spider, at the moment of divination, is ‘God for the time being’, then one can understand the strong ‘law’ not to watch it at work. Here, it would seem, lies the basis and ultimate reason for the unshakable conviction of the Yamba diviner that the spider speaks the truth. God is the source of all truth, and the spider, at the moment of divination, is ‘God for the time being’.

I found another interesting way of addressing the spider in Mfe. Having made the necessary preparations at the spider hole, the diviner speaks into the hole as follows:

*Nwi nə bəboŋ, tsok yu nə bəboŋ. A ŋga ŋgwen yi kpɛ tsok fa mu. — Nwi nə bɔp, yi ka və -ŋga yi ka a kpɛ tsok fa mu. A ŋga nzak tsok fa mu.*

Good god, tell me good things. If the person is going to die, tell me. — Evil god, let him not come! — If the person is not going to die, tell me. If there is a case, tell me (interview with Nsangong, 17 October 1992).

A distinction is made between the good god and the evil god. The evil god is told to stay away from the divination and not to interfere. Only the good god can show good things, i.e. the truth.

Having addressed the spider, the diviner now proceeds to explain the case to it. As an example I take Pa Monday’s own case when he fell sick in Nwa:

I come with my own case. I fell seriously ill in Nwa. I almost died. I stand here at your door. This single stick is myself. Whether I have stolen somebody’s possession and that is the reason why this ‘war’ has attacked me — catch my head [i.e. my stick] and tell me the reason so that I may know. This forked stick stands for my family in Ngwen [a sub-quarter of Sang in Gom]. If they are the cause of my sickness come tell me whether they have bewitched me. This stick pierced through a small cocoyam leaf on the ground stands for my in-laws in Nkwi, N. and N. I have married their daughter. If they held a meeting to bewitch me, ‘hold’ their stick and tell me the reason, etc. (observed divination, 16 July 1991).

There were still three more sticks, viz. the people of Nwa, the people of Sabongari, and his wife and children, which were explained in the same way. But the above should suffice to give an idea of how the case is explained to the spider. Pa Monday’s closing remarks were: ‘My death which I (almost) died in Nwa, that is the case I put before you.’

Note the repeated request by the diviner that *ŋgam* should tell him the ‘reason’ (*fa njo*). More will be said on this point when I discuss the process of interpretation.

Having put the case to the spider, the diviner blows into the hole once or twice. He then places the pack of leaf-cards in an upright stack over the spider's hole, arranged in the manner described above, i.e. the positive cards at the bottom and the negative cards on top or the other way round. It does not matter which part is up and which part down. The spider will make its own selection. Pa Taabi leaned the cards on the entrance of the hole like a set of fallen domino pieces but making sure that the hole was covered.

A pot or a basin, which has no bottom, is placed over the whole set-up and the hole on top is covered with a large cocoyam leaf. If there is no pot at hand, twigs or bamboo splinters are bent over the whole device and covered with cocoyam leaves. No palm wine is sprayed over the enclosure and no insects or leaves are placed under the cards or in the enclosure. Neither client nor diviner have to observe any taboos before divining.

Having made all the necessary preparations, the diviner and client will withdraw or go back to the house. In most cases spider divination is set up for the night, since the spider is a nocturnal animal, but it is also done during the day. The covered enclosure simulates night and makes the spider come out. But I have been present several times when the spider has failed to come out during the day. Several divinations can be done during a single night.

### 3.7. Principles and processes of interpretation

Now comes the most important and most difficult part of spider divination: the interpretation. In the morning or when the diviner, after inspection, sees that the spider has come and disturbed the cards, he will move the pot carefully and look at the result in silence for some time, studying the configuration of the cards in relation to the sticks. Then he begins the interpretation, which can be divided into two parts, the 'verdict' and the 'reasons'.

First, through the verdict the spider points out the guilty party. Negative cards (it must be remembered that they were grouped together) pointing at or touching a stick means that *ngam* has 'caught' this person or group of persons. Positive cards pointing at or touching a stick means that the person or group of persons represented by the stick are 'free'. A stick standing empty, i.e. with no cards pointing at or touching it, means that a person or group of persons have had no dealings with the case and are not implicated.

There are a number of other possibilities also, however:

- Red earth has been placed on top of a card by the spider. This is an ominous sign, for it augurs death and there is no escape from it. Every diviner and non-diviner alike was quick to point this out to me. Pa Monday told me that when

the spider wants to tell the diviner that a sick person on whose behalf the divination is made will die, 'it goes to the bottom of its hole, digs red ground there, then comes up and puts it on the card. Start crying!'

- If the spider pulls a leaf-card into the hole, it is another bad omen, also auguring death.
- If the spider, on entering its hole, places a leaf-card on top of the hole, thus covering the entrance, it means that it is still hiding something. The spider has not revealed everything.
- A leaf-card is the wrong way up. This means that the client must 'judge the case' or there will be death. 'Judging the case' usually means that the client or his people will have to call a meeting of all members of the lineage or in-laws. They will be asked to discuss the result of the divination and will come up with some 'mistake' or transgression of the patient or one of his immediate family members. Following the 'reasons' given by the divination (see below), they will decide on what action to take to remedy the situation, which usually consists of performing one of the many rituals of the Yamba. This, in rather simple terms, is the interpretation of the verdict.

Having read the verdict, the diviner goes on to give the 'reasons' (*njo*). Here the meaning of the cards comes into play. The diviner separates the leaf-cards according to which stick they are pointing to or touching. He neatly joins them up in his hands as they lie on the ground. Then he turns over the pack and begins with the top card which originally was the bottom-most card. Taking one card at a time, he will name it and give his comments. All cards receive attention, but some more than others, according to the case in question.

When I observed the reading of the cards for the first time, it reminded me of a panel game in which the candidates were given a list of unconnected words and asked to make up a coherent story on the spot. By interpreting each card, the diviner will give the reason why a death, sickness or misfortune occurred and what must be done to remedy the situation, e.g. that the sick person will recover or further misfortune be averted.

An example may illustrate how the diviner proceeds. One day, Pa Monday suggested that I should ask *ngam* to tell me which of four villages would allow me to open a Catholic Church in their midst. We chose the villages of Bom, Sih, Ntong and Kwaja. The verdict was that Bom and Ntong would refuse, Sih people were divided and Kwaja would be in favour. I must confess that I was rather surprised at the result. Pa Monday had no way of knowing that the chief of Kwaja had approached me several times with the request to open a Catholic mission in his village. A Catholic Church had been opened in

Sih in 1954 but was closed soon after. So it was quite possible that there were some people in favour and others against. As regards Bom and Ntong, I could not say anything because I had had no opportunity of finding out.

Having told me the verdict, Pa Monday now took the cards pointing to the stick representing Bom (all negative) and began to read them to me. When he had read one he placed it in my hand.

Table 2. Divination cards

Card	Commentary
<i>kur nə bɨp</i> — ‘evil meeting’	As for Bom they will hold a meeting and discuss your request to build a church there. They will never agree.
<i>dək nə bɨp</i> — ‘evil war’; literally ‘evil war shield’	They will fight against you — this card symbolizes war, evil war. Even if you want to force the issue, they will fight against you. They will refuse to give you a plot.
<i>mbam nə bɨp</i> — ‘evil money’	Some people will say they would agree to give you a plot, if at all, they would charge you a huge amount of money. But other people will refuse even that.
<i>rɨm ɨwumbam nə bɨp</i> — ‘evil male witch’	A man who is a proper witch will say that whatever happens he will bewitch you. You will have to enter the grave.
<i>bam nə bɨp</i> — ‘evil bag’	Your bag which you hang from your shoulder will be ‘open’ since you have died [i.e. people are free to search your bag].
<i>ncum nə bɨp</i> — ‘evil death drum’	They have already brought out the drum to beat for your death rite. They will take cloth and wrap you in it. Look! Don’t you see the cloth? [There was spider’s web around the card]. This is <i>mba</i> ’ [spider’s web], the spider’s own cloth. They will wrap you in it.
<i>mvəp nə bɨp</i> — ‘evil fowl’	They will eat this fowl on your behalf [i.e. they will feast your death].

Table 2. Divination cards

Card	Commentary
<i>fu tsək rəm nə bɔp</i> — ‘evil leaf of witches’ [meat is wrapped in leaves]	They will eat the ‘leaf’ [i.e. the meat provided for the death celebration] saying that they are celebrating your death.
<i>ɲwantap nə bɔp</i> — ‘evil <i>ɲwantap</i> ’ [most secret society of men; the sacra of this society]	They will celebrate your death, death caused by <i>ɲwantap</i> .
	This is the end of this line. And now to Kwaja. Do you see? All these cards concern Kwaja. Let me show you what they say. Kwaja agrees that you build a church there.
<i>ncu nə bəbɔŋ</i> - ‘good door’	When you build them a church, they will open the door by themselves.
<i>kur nə bəbɔŋ</i> - ‘good meeting’	They have already held a meeting at which they expressed their wish that you should come and build them a church.
<i>kur rəm nə bəbɔŋ</i> - ‘good meeting of witches’	The witches too held a meeting, all of them joined. They said that they would not bewitch you. They will let you bring the church. All witches agreed to that.
<i>rəm ɲwaŋwe nə bəbɔŋ</i> - ‘good witch woman’	A very strong and evil witch woman says that she too likes you to bring that church
<i>nfəssie nə bəbɔŋ</i> - ‘good burial ground’	. Let the ancestors not wake up. Let [ancestors of living memory] them agree to have this church in the village. Let nobody refuse, whether <i>nfəssie</i> or whoever.
<i>mbe nə bəbɔŋ</i> - ‘good leopard’ [witchcraft]	The church is a good church where transformation] ‘leopard’ will not be able to catch people. Look! This card shows a ‘good leopard’.
<i>dək luŋgoŋ nə bəbɔŋ</i> - ‘good talk of long ago’	Since a long time ago, people have been talking about you, that you are a leader of Christians and talk well.

Table 2. Divination cards

Card	Commentary
<i>mvəp nə bəboŋ</i> - ‘good fowl’	When you come, they will be happy and kill a fowl and roast it for you to eat.
<i>to nəzəp nə bəboŋ</i> - ‘good crossing of stream’	The stream(s) which you will have to cross going to Kwaja will pose no problems. It will be a good trek.
<i>vəm nəzum nə bəboŋ</i> - ‘good pregnancy’	All pregnant women will agree to enter the church.
<i>mbam nə bəboŋ</i> - ‘good money’	As they have agreed to have the church, some money will be donated, as is the custom of the church as regards offering.
<i>bam nə bəboŋ</i> - ‘good bag’	The bag which you hang from your shoulder is a good bag.
<i>gi nə bəboŋ</i> - ‘good journey’	Your journey to Kwaja will be without trouble. It will be a good journey.

There were still more positive cards pointing to the stick representing Kwaja, but the above should be enough for the reader to get an idea how the diviner reads the cards, making his explanation suit the case in question. Divining about a journey to be undertaken would follow a similar pattern but it would be quite different in cases of sickness, death and misfortune.

The literal meaning of a card is often stretched and can take on a figurative meaning. Once in Nkot, when Pa Monday’s dogs ran away, he divined their whereabouts — whether they were still in Nkot, gone to Gom, or returned to Sabongari. The outcome of the divination was that they were not in Nkot (the stick was ‘empty’), had not gone to Sabongari (negative cards were pointing to that stick), but were in Gom (positive cards were pointing to Gom). When Pa Monday went through the pile of cards pointing to the stick representing Gom, he suddenly started. There was one negative card among them, *vəm nəzum nə buɸ*, ‘evil pregnancy’. But in this case Pa Monday referred to it as ‘broken last’ (burst anus), meaning that something or someone had died. Two days later, I learned that one of the dogs, which had had a long piece of chain dragging from its neck, had strangled itself on the way to Gom. When the dog was crossing a deep gully across which two logs served as a bridge, the chain got stuck between the logs and threw the dog off-balance; suspended in mid-

air, with the chain tightening around its neck, it died. Pa Monday told me later on when I met him again that when he saw this particular card he was sure that one of the dogs had died, although he did not tell me at the time. But I had taken note of it.

At the end of the divination, the diviner will recapitulate his findings in a few words. He will point out the verdict and then give a summary of the ‘reasons’, especially the line of action to be taken to remedy the situation or to avoid further calamity.

Summing up, we can say that in spider divination the diviner has at his disposal several means to help him in his interpretation: the sticks which already narrow down the possibilities; the direction of the cards (pointing to or touching a stick); and the polarity of the cards (negative-positive). These help him to give the verdict, whereas the meaning of the cards, the symbols, help him to indicate the ‘reasons’ (*njo*) and the line of action to take.

### 3.8. Cross-checking veracity

Yamba spider divination does not include the practice of putting truth-testing questions to the spider or administering an ordeal to it, as recorded by Zeitlyn (1987: 10) for the Mambila. So, what options are open to the diviner or client if he is not satisfied with or doubtful about the outcome of the divination? Here the opinions of my informants differ. Pa Taabi and Nsangong of Mfe say that one can put the same case to the same spider again, in other words repeat the same divination at the same hole. They maintain that the result will be basically the same, but more details or different aspects may be revealed. Pa Monday strongly disagrees. If one puts the same case to the same spider a second time, it will be annoyed and refuse to come out:

‘If you ask the spider twice it will not come out ... since it has told you everything and you know it. If you repeat the same thing although it has already told you, it will refuse to come out. It will say that it has told you everything, and now you ask the same thing again — you want it to come out to tell you what again? It will refuse to come out’ (interview, 15 July 1991).

The reason given sounds convincing. Does this mean that Pa Monday has no other way of double-checking the outcome of divination? Not at all! If he is not satisfied he will transfer the case to another hole and put the same case there. He left me in no doubt, too, that the result will always be the same because *ngam* never lies.

I had the opportunity of observing a repeated divination. It was the case about Pa Monday’s sudden illness in Nwa. I did not witness the first divina-

tion, but he told me the outcome before he put the same case to a spider in Sabongari when I was present. The result was indeed basically the same. The spider again ‘caught’ his own people in Gom. They had ‘bewitched’ him because he refused to take over from the present lineage head who was old and blind and could no longer perform all his duties. In Sabongari, Pa Monday discovered an additional reason: he owned some money to one of his relatives!

#### 4. Some further points of interest

##### Divining *coŋ*

When the client has done everything he was advised to do by the divination he may come to the diviner and ask to divine *coŋ*. This means that the diviner should find out whether everything is now ‘peace’ or whether there is still something which the client has to do. The outcome of a divination is referred to as *coŋ* (peace) when all the negative cards are covered by positive cards so that the negative cards cannot be seen.

##### Divination and witchcraft

According to Pa Monday, witchcraft can interfere with spider divination, not in the sense that it would confuse the spider so that its verdict is unreliable, but by harming the spider or chasing it away. *ŋgam se* can detect witches. When *ŋgam se* proves somebody to be a witch the diviner must reveal it. This practice brought Pa Monday a lot of enmity and opposition, especially from his own lineage. But he says that there is no way out:

Divination is able to prove somebody to be a witch. For a man it is not possible to do so. When divination reveals that a certain person is a witch...my ‘big father’ asked me, ‘when *ŋgam* catches a witch are you going to reveal it amongst people?’ I say, I cannot refuse because my own [divination] is these leaf-cards. Nobody can see *ŋgam* down underground. When it catches a person, saying, ‘You are a witch’, if I don’t reveal it, *ŋgam* will say to me, ‘I have told you that you should tell people thus, why do you hide it, telling a lie instead? What for?’ It will take its hand like this and lock my eyes and I will no longer be able to see anything good again. All my ‘kitchen’ [people of the lineage] say, ‘No, if *ŋgam* catches a witch and you reveal it, it is not good’. They tell me not to reveal it. I tell them that I cannot do otherwise. If I fail to reveal it, ‘my talk will not stand up’. If they forbid me to do so, I won’t see anybody coming to me with a request to divine for him, because this one inside the ground tells the truth. It does not lie.

This clearly shows that the diviner is in an awkward predicament. Either he hides what *ngam* has revealed to him and so is untruthful to *ngam* and to the client and will be punished, or he reveals what he sees to be the truth, thus incurring the wrath of his family and the people accused of being witches.

An exception to the rule: the normal practice in making *ngam se* is that the diviner uses all the cards in his set, but I have witnessed one exception to this rule. When I was with Pa Monday in Nkot, he was faced with the problem of having to make two divinations at the same time but having only one set of cards. The two cases in question were the case of the runaway dogs described above and the illness of the daughter of Fo-Ndu, the chief of Ndu quarter of Nkot. Pa Monday divided his set of cards into two sections of forty cards each (i.e. twenty pairs each). He picked out those pairs, which were relevant to each case. He used one section at one spider hole and another section at a different spider hole. He could do so, as he later told me, because the two cases were quite different in nature. Had there been two cases of illness, for example, he could not have done it.

### Remuneration

Finally, a word about remuneration. None of my informants, as already mentioned, divined for a living, except Pa Taabi. They were either farmers or petty traders. Many of the diviners I know are lineage heads. I asked Pa Monday how much a person had to pay for a divination.

A woman pays 250 frs CFA<sup>27</sup>. A man may be asked to pay 300 or 500 frs according to the nature of the case. If somebody brings you a calabash of palm wine, you do not ask for money. If a man comes to you to divine about his temporary impotence and the divination is successful in pointing out the cause and the *ngā ncəp* [medicine man] he has to consult to regain his potency, he will be asked to pay 1000 frs.

### 5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried as far as possible to be faithful to the convictions and practices of the Yamba spider diviner; it is our responsibility as analysts to do so (Zeitlyn 1987: 21). One thing which struck me more than anything else while working with diviners is the absolute sincerity with which they practice divination. Their faith in the truthfulness of *ngam se* is unshakeable: ‘*ngam de talk true, e no de talk lie!*’, runs like a constant refrain through all

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27. The exchange rate with the French Franc when the research was undertaken was 50 CFA to the franc (c. 1 Euro to 330 CFA – it is now 1 Euro to 660 CFA).

my tapes and fieldnotes. I have tried to show that the basis for this conviction is their belief that the spider at the time of divination is god, that the spider (equated with god) is the source of the truthfulness of divination. The diviner as interpreter must faithfully convey this truth to the client. No Yamba would accept that 'any diviner worthy of his "fowl" gives an answer acceptable to his client' (Marwick 1965: 92, quoting Monica Wilson).