

**BOOK REVIEW: SOME COMMENTS ON DAVID ZEITLYN'S MAMBILA
SPIDER DIVINATION**

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David Zeitlyn offers a stimulating account following over thirty years of meticulous interaction with the practitioners of the spider divination system of the Mambila, who are mostly found in the north-west region of Cameroon, sharing a boundary with the north-east of Nigeria. Although there are various types of divination among the peoples, Zeitlyn settles for the spider divination technique with the overall intention of revising not only the ways that anthropological studies on divination conduct their fieldwork but also the urgency of elaborating on the importance of “clients rather than diviners, notwithstanding that the difficulties in doing so are demonstrated by my own failures” (ZEITLYN 2020, 1). Zeitlyn seems to take the position that previous studies cede priority to the diviner over the client. It is likely that this approach, which he preaches, may have been inspired by his years of practice and fieldwork following his initiation into Mambila spider divination: “To my surprise, Mambila diviners and clients spend as much effort on framing the questions as on interpreting the results. Sociolinguistic approaches encourage us to reflect on this” (ZEITLYN 2020, 7). On this showing, it is no surprise that Zeitlyn wishes to devote more attention to how questions are framed and answers are constructed, as diviners and their clients navigate the labyrinths of interpretation and agency.

Although I am neither a social anthropologist like Zeitlyn nor a sociolinguist, I am fascinated by Zeitlyn’s analysis of Mambila spider divination from a metaphysical and (African) philosophy of religion perspective. I have undertaken fieldwork, studied, and published on African divination systems, such as Ifá among the Yorùbá. I have also considered the base-2 numerical system, which undergirds similar divination systems such as the Bamana of Senegal, the Sikidy system of Madagascar and the Comoro Islands, as well as the Hakata four-tablet system in Southern Africa (OFUASIA n.d.n. 2021; OFUASIA 2026). So, upon encountering Zeitlyn’s book on Mambila spider divination, I realised that this is another progressive step in the critical assessment of divination systems in Africa. Aside from the urge to engage with the work as a comprehensive effort to make sense of how ancient Africans diagnose and predict, the second urge or motivation derives from checking whether spider divination among the Mambila parallels or departs from the previous systems of divination that I have studied.

Zeitlyn’s book comprises ten chapters. The first chapter introduces the book’s aim, discusses the methods of anthropological research, and provides a brief overview of the parties and tools involved in spider divination among the Mambila. The remaining nine chapters are unevenly distributed across the book’s three parts: studying, doing, and using. Before offering my thoughts on the book, I provide a terse overview of the contents of each of these three parts in order to assist with some of the points that I wish to articulate.

In the first part of the book, there are chapters two, three, and four. Chapter two's main focus is on various studies conducted on the interpretation of divination. This chapter critically discusses Zeitlyn's criticism of how previous approaches in anthropology overlook the mark: "As noted in the Introduction, my emphasis changed as this book progressed. A review of conventional anthropological accounts of divination reveals their concentration on some aspects of divinatory practice while largely ignoring the perspective of the clients" (ZEITLYN 2020, 21). The chapter also provides useful information concerning the classification of divination and previous sociological assessments (most of which Zeitlyn does not endorse). This leads him to arrive at this position: "My conclusion is that divination must be recognised as a dialogic process, consultation is a collaboration between the diviner and client" (ZEITLYN 2020, 24). Zeitlyn's goal is clear from the outset — to bring the perspective of the client during interpretation into the socio-anthropological study of divination. In his words; "One of my key interests has been the way in which interpretation and the accepted result of the divinatory consultation emerge from that process of negotiation" (ZEITLYN 2020, 34).

"Finding Meaning in the Text" is the title of chapter three. Here, Zeitlyn turns to text-based divination systems found not only in Africa but also in China. His focus here is to show how meaning and agency are generated through the interpretation of ancient texts that are connected to and consulted within divination systems like Ifá and *Yijin*. One of the key points in this chapter is implied in Zeitlyn's (2020, 53) argument that in book divination, diviners engage in a crude form of literary criticism: "Diviners interpreting archaic texts produce an idiosyncratic indigenous criticism." Zeitlyn's discernment affirms my conviction, as one of my publications (OFUASIA 2019) concedes that in Ifá, the conjoined efforts of diviners and clients toward actuating meaning from the text are an exercise in deconstructionism.

Chapter four returns to the topic of spider divination as a tool for settling social issues. In this chapter, Zeitlyn provides an important account of the use of spiders in divination not only among the Mambila but also in other parts of Cameroon, like Banen and Bamiléké. In his analysis, Zeitlyn also takes pains to distinguish cognitive from sociological explanations related to the application of spider divination in the locations of his focus during fieldwork. Chapter five is a very interesting chapter that brings the first part of the book to a close. The chapter's aim is to uncover the logic of divination as it pertains to diagnosis and prediction. Personally, I find this chapter most appealing because it evinces how divination plays a crucial role in African medical practices. This is where divination is invited to provide information about disease aetiology and treatment course. Engagement in *sùàgà* sacrifice among the Mambila parallels *ètùtù* (i.e., sacrifice) among the clients of Ifá seeking medical assistance from ailments that have defied western medical intervention.

In chapter six, the first chapter in the second part of the book, "Doing," Zeitlyn discloses, in a deeper fashion, the nitty-gritty of spider divination among the Mambila. Among the Mambila, there are other forms of divination like mat, snail, stick bundle, water in calabash, sand, cowrie divinations, but as indicated previously, the type of divination which Zeitlyn was initiated into is *ngam dù*, which literally means 'divination earth' or 'spider divination.' The '*dù*' refers to earth or spider, whereas *ngam* is a generic term among the Mambila to refer to divination generally. As Zeitlyn (2020, 8) reveals; "The divination technique consists of posing a question to a *ngam* spider which lives in a hole in the ground. An inhabited spider-hole is located and immediately it is cleared of vegetation. Alternatively, a spider can be dug out of its hole and placed in a more conveniently sited abandoned hole." An old pot whose base is completely removed is placed upside down, over the hole as this exposed base is covered with tin or lid. The purpose is to make opening and closing easier, allowing access to the pot's contents without lifting it. Furthermore, the essence is to enclose the area and exclude the penetration of sunlight "... to induce the (mainly nocturnal) spider

to emerge by day. The pot demarcates the area within which the spiders act during divination” (ZEITLYN 2020, 8). In addition to the area (or spider hole) enclosed by the old pot to eliminate light rays, diviners also insert a stick (to the left) and a stone (to the right) on either side of the spider hole. Opposite the spider hold (i.e., about 10 centimetres downwards) are divination leaf-cards. These cards may represent or indicate states of affairs or ideograms such as a palm tree, an animal belly, a village chief, fufu, maize, etc. Zeitlyn discusses how diviners and clients cooperate as they seek answers to questions posed to the spider. The truth, thought, and logic behind the process were other topics of interest in this chapter. Although these are not unfamiliar to me, an initiate and academic of Ifá, chapter seven humbles me. Here, Zeitlyn’s skills concerning the assessment of the logic in interpretation and resolution of seeming contradictions affirm the thesis that the laws of thought in classical logic are inadequate to entertain the ‘logical problems’ that arise from interpretation in African systems of divination.

Chapter eight is the first chapter in the third part of the book. Here, Zeitlyn’s aim is to understand whether divination pays attention to pragmatics. This chapter signals the ways through which both diviner and client collaborate as they seek to make meaning from the ‘revelations’ of the spider’s ‘activities’ in the pot. This does not come as a surprise since in chapter nine, Zeitlyn returns to reinforce his emphasis on comprehending the essence of divination, taking the perspective of the client into account. As he emphasises; “This chapter considers Mambila divination from the clients’ perspective, analysing how their questions reveal their understanding of the potential uses of divination” (ZEITLYN 2020, 174). In this chapter, divination sessions and case studies related to health, witchcraft attacks, rituals, etc., are discussed, with the primary aim of underscoring how divination plays an active role in social formation. Chapter ten, the final chapter, contains case studies and the framing of questions in the search for answers between diviners and clients.

No doubt, Zeitlyn’s initiation, familiarity and research on spider divination among the Mambila is praiseworthy. However, there are two points that struck me while engaging with the publication. First, the logic question! Throughout the book, Zeitlyn labours to demonstrate that spider divination cannot be adduced as illogical since contradiction calls for reinterpretation and proper framing of questions, inviting further discussion. This reminds one of Alfred N. Whitehead’s (1948, 182) encouragement in [Science and the Modern World], not to surrender to the law of noncontradiction since “a clash of doctrines is not a disaster — it is an opportunity.” Zeitlyn provides convincing arguments about the possibility of alternative systems of logic, like Inferential Erotic Logic and Logic Programming for spider divination. I contend that even with these systems, the laws of thought will still present an impasse. This is why, in a related discourse on logic and Ifá divination, Ezumezu logic, an Afro-inspired alternative system of logic with revisions to the laws of thought, has been employed to account for the logic of Ifá (DASAOLU n.d.n. 2023; OFUASIA 2024). Hence, the law of thought poses a challenge to understanding how two seemingly opposed variables may contribute to knowledge.

The second issue I noticed with Zeitlyn’s work is that he digresses, most of the time, from the focus of his book — the place of the client in the curation of meaning in Mambila spider divination. This leads him to provide unnecessary commentary on other forms of divination, thereby giving inaccurate information. For instance, in footnote 15 of chapter 2, Zeitlyn makes an unreliable pronouncement that “[n]o study of Ifá divination *in practice* has yet been published even in recent studies...” This claim is contestable since Omotade Adegbindin (2014), Oludamini Ogunnaike (2015), Akinmayowa Akin-Otiko (2018) and Emmanuel Ofuasia (2019) have been concerned with the same issue of interpretation and negotiation that arises during the triangular interactions among Ọ̀rúnmìlà (the Yorùbá Ọ̀rìṣà vested with wisdom), the Ifá diviner and the client. All of these works arrived prior to

Zeitlyn's book in 2020, but they did not receive his attention, which led him to make that misleading pronouncement.

These two points nevertheless do not vitiate Zeitlyn's originality and intentions of providing what is, to me, a fair and well-researched account of Mambila spider divination. As a researcher in the philosophical issues arising from Ifá divination, I am compelled to applaud Zeitlyn because most of the points he mentions concerning spider divination are present in Ifá: the possibility of computer-assisted divination, testing of divination instruments for reliability, lack of linguistic and religious barriers, initiation, as well as negotiation between diviner and clients toward answers. Even as these similarities may be noticed, there are, however, some areas of discrepancy. Ifá has a literary corpus whose contents are usually memorised by diviners following years of training, but spider divination differs. Both men and women can be diviners in Ifá, unlike Mambila spider divination, where only men are allowed.

Zeitlyn's book, therefore, signals the need for a cross-cultural analysis of the logic and truth in African systems of divination in light of modernity and the influence of artificial intelligence (AI) on contemporary life. Hence, I recommend Zeitlyn's work as not only one that exposes the reader to Mambila spider divination but also serves as an affirmation to some of the similarities in the *modus operandi* of African systems of divination.

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