

Losing deixis, making economy:

The cosmo-nomics of East-African divination under globalisation

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Scholars maintaining that there is nothing special about the society that produced science and that has gropingly been defined in the past as industrial, modern, capitalist, imperialist, globalizing or (post)colonial should stop and ponder for a moment about divination, a practice grounded on the paradoxical belief that one can better one's fate by knowing one's fate. The natural sciences has taught us that the world is one, an entity out there to be described, constituting one fate. One globe. Divination intrinsically means that there are many worlds, and that to become conscious of these (through oracle) permits us to determine our fate by selecting the right world, hence by engaging in what René Devisch (1994) coined world-making. With every leap into the Real – the pre-symbolic realm of the mediums' immediacy, ancestral immission or inspiration, and chance, animated or not (the flip of a coin, why not!) – the world starts anew.

This divinatory cosmology conflicts radically with the one carefully crafted by institutions such as school, government and churches, the latter in dialogue with biblical sources. But it is the latter that gets globally spread, structurally and financially supported and obligatorily socialized at all levels across the world, from universities in Belgium to primary schools in Tanzania. Even today as our Western models transplanted worldwide seem erroneous, as the economy appears to work differently than predicted, democracy no longer offers the solution for the planet's ailments, our social and industrial engineering model turns out unsustainable, and even quantum-mechanical experiments point to literally 'many worlds', we refuse to see how our one-world ideology is shuddering at its foundations. We as members of the better class refuse to see that apathy in political decision-making follows from that very worldview, a globalist *nomos* (management, ordering, making) of *cosmos* (world) limited to the visible world of our immediate surroundings (*oikos/ecos*, household) and denying the contingency (meaning 'arrival' but from where? Surely, the invisible world!) of fate.

But this worldview we, including anthropologists, tacitly reinforce when assuming that divinatory traditions and non-Western cosmologies transmitted for hundreds of generations are external to science and to the mentioned structures of socialization, that they yield no real 'knowledge' and should be reserved for the fairly exotic category known as anthropological research. It is at this fundamental level of cosmologies (seen as cosmo-economies, cf. Rio and Da Col, this volume) engaging with each other that the following paper discusses oracular practice.

Two traditions of divination

Part of the author's longer term project of differentiating types of globalization, this study compares two traditions of divination in Eastern Africa. Each tradition has its own socio-economic and ecological context (cf. the map of two research locations: Sukuma speakers in Misungwi district in North-Tanzania and Luguru speakers in Mgeta ward in South-Tanzania). The first, known as basket divination and called *ng'hambo* among Sukuma-speaking farmers,

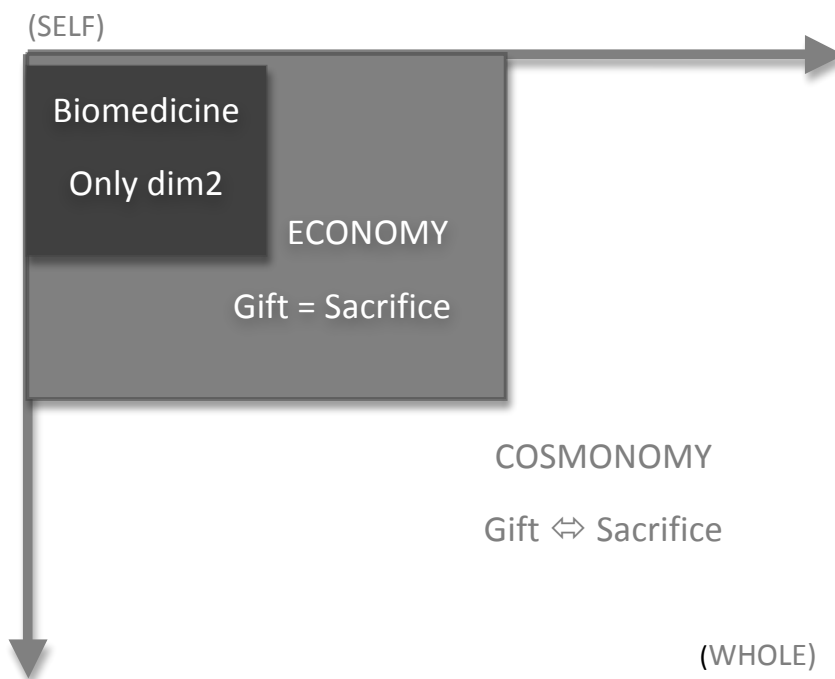
is mostly practiced in the interior part of Central and Eastern African countries. Clients place an object such as a sapping twig representing their fate (*ndagu*) in a basket full of paraphernalia which the mediumistic diviner will subsequently read with the help of his or her guiding spirit. Through their presence and participation in the oracle, the ancestral spirits (the medium's or the client's) show their concern in the outcome of the crisis or misfortune, an event that greatly contributes to the reassuring, even 'healing' effect of the oracle. The conceptual assessment refers to local cosmology; the remedy does so too in the rituals or magic prescribed, which the client will need to respectively organize or learn to prepare. Nobody knows for sure if and why the traditional rituals will work, but they will 'cool' (*kupoja*) the world. The world will come to peace, and the person will indirectly benefit from that. Like any oracle, much of *ng'hambo* remains obscure to both client and diviner, requires interpretative experience and training, and is inaccessible to an outsider, even if non-Sukuma speakers do consult *ng'hambo*, counting on the diviner's translation. *Ng'hambo* oracles are deictic, namely denoting a meaning that depends on the context – a context which in the end is the Sukuma cosmology of medicinal potions, plant forces, and spirits (*masamva*), protective or provoked.

The second, *nyato* or 'stars', is mostly found at the coast, in towns and partly has an Islamic history (the word is KiSwahili; the divinatory act is *kusafisha nyato*, literally 'to develop one's star', as in 'developing' pictures, *kusafisha picha*). An object such as mirror is used to capture the client's soul and to subsequently calculate – with elaborate finger ticking on the mirror and writing procedures - the soul or life-force of the client. The client receives an estimation of his or her 'star' and a score on three scales. Here the ancestral spirits play no role; both Luguru cosmology and the Koran are a very distant preoccupation. The obstacle to one's fortune is looked for. And that normally is a person, gnawing at the client's energy. It is through the power of witchcraft attack against that person that one's own 'star' can be made to shine better. The oracle makes no reference to a context other than that of the client's personal condition and interpersonal relations. The client need not know about local cosmologies or multi-layered concepts. In analogy with hospital medicine, the diviner in principle addresses a cultureless clientele, oriented on manifest results and focused on personal benefit, not on any state of the world or surrounding community. The concepts used are limited and are 'referential' in that they have unambiguous meaning, corresponding to clear-cut entities in the external world such as the calculation of a person's energy level.

Both traditions are open to foreign clients, have spread across the continent along trade routes, and today often exist side by side, with considerable overlap in cosmopolitan areas such as the coastal areas and commercial centers. But, we will conclude, the two relate in a very different, indeed opposite manner to globalization. The one stems from it, the other remains in tension with it. *Nyato* thrives in highly globalized, multicultural areas where the local cosmology is no longer reproduced through socialization, initiation or other traditions of cultural transmission. *Ng'hambo* suffers from the pressure worldwide on these traditional forms of cultural transmission because depends on these.

//The advantage of comparing *ng'hambo* and *nyato* in terms of their deictic versus referential discourse is methodological. To substantiate our hypothesis, we can now examine respective instances of oracular discourse (applying among others Silverstein's semiotic approach). The language can moreover be analyzed grammatically, among others for its distal versus proximal and medial pro-forms. But more broadly, on a level eluding discursive analysis and which this paper will exploit fully, the totality of fieldwork experiences may help to contrast the purpose of the two practices. One purpose of divination, described since Victor Turner and later René Devisch, is world-making/ordering

or the cosmo-nomic (cosmos, world; nomos, order) which includes the invisible world of spirits and unknown forces. Yet, paradoxically, another purpose equally well described (cf Zeitlyn, Abbink) is its contraction, a version of the cosmo-nomic that is reduced to the visible world only, the economic (oikos, house; nomos, order), with its easily sustained illusion of measurable debt and credit, and market efficiency (although less easily sustained since the 2008 bank crisis). Unlike ng'hambo, nyato can deny the part of the invisible world that must be reached through placation, hope, trial and subjunctivity, in one word sacrifice. Nyato's world is one of efficiency and accountability, better: one where investment (for example, of magic) will yield return, in brief: gift without sacrifice – a type of divination perfectly adapted to economic activity, namely the sort of preoccupation with 'the household' that does not concern itself with impact on the larger world, social or natural. While ng'hambo - 'cosmonomic' divination par excellence - works by managing the states of the world, always seeking to ground itself in the cosmology and thus affecting the participants' various modes and codes of the senses, nyato can be understood as 'economic' divination: diviners have freed themselves from the shackles of community and cosmology, and are willing to lose deixis to make more clients and develop a referentialist discourse that is nationally and globally accessible. That is why until today nyato survives together with ng'hambo. Both types of oracle stipulate how to access wealth and fortune (*kuhanganwa*). They differ in the way of reaching the Real and making world: nyato from self to whole, ng'hambo from whole to self (cf figure below; gift/sacrifice to be briefly explained via Stroeken 2010).



Nyato coalesces with fortune-seeking techniques which collide with the market economy and its Puritan, meritocratic ideology. All divinatory techniques push at these limits (represented by the grey square in the figure: is those in charge because superior in the current terms, according to the dominant criteria) to break through its frontiers (the glass ceilings of class, gender, race, language) and to enter through the ancestor's voice, the rooster's entrails or the roll of dice into the invisible world of the pre-symbolic, open-ended realm of Lacan's *réel*, where worlds are born, made and re-made. That is the cosmo-nomy obnubilated by meritocratic capital: no investment of wealth (producing more wealth) can

be accepted as part of the gift system (yielding social status and power) unless the giver is willing to submit this gift to the recognition of the community, past and present. To make the sacrifice of self to the spirits, thus distinguishing and relating gift and sacrifice, as opposed to equating both, allows for an egalitarian, potentially redistributive cosmology that state economies and central authorities in the postcolony today combat. How to channel their voice in current debates of crisis? We can try to culturally translate. From the above we learn that not the law of 'debt' (Graeber) should vex us, but our incapacity of living with debt, that is: our misunderstanding of debt as an absolute calculus, unmediated by the just-mentioned sacrificial logic of social recognition. It is at this fundamental level, of Mauss's *le don*, that we see once again (after Marx and Weber) how closely related are economy and religion.

(INSERT DATA on divinatory sessions and cosmology of itongelejo, itono, shitumba)

Systemic globalization

Nyato thrives in clandestine settings, but ng'hambo suffers, we have seen. By lack of local authority structure, which has been effectively undermined since colonial interventions and current national anti-witchcraft policies, the practice evolves in hiding and thus becomes something else, looking more and more like a secretive ploy in the hands of those willing to defy legality, or of charlatans seeing an opportunity in the free play given after the disappearance of societal sanction – after the organized demise of 'collective reason', the cultural process keeping practices relevant and vibrant. Oracles become tribunals, instead of the ritual therapy they were meant to be. And so identified witches are killed. The very thing postcolonial anthropologists in defense of the ever-dynamic nature of culture disallowed themselves to think is taking place. The oracular tradition gets corrupted in the core, as it creates an addiction to witch killing, without the actual relief that belief in counter-magic could give. By lack of local structures sanctioning cultural innovations, the economy decides and indeed welcomes the socially unsustainable but perfectly marketable idea of killing bright bodies (alibino's) to get shiny stuff (gold nuggets, fish), and of using the machete against the witch instead of outdated counter-magic.

What is the difference between a practice – to use a less charged term than tradition - dying out in Europe and one in Africa, say ritual initiation into magic? In the latter case we may legitimately wonder whether the cultural change was in any way a matter of choice, agency, cultural selection, collective (as opposed to individual) reason or wisdom after trial and error as it used to be. Even if colonization has been replaced by the seemingly de-centered process of globalization, more than ever powerful players are involved in the change of practices today: national and international governments, NGO's, churches financed abroad, Islamic institutions, universities, scientific journals and committees. And very little local counter-power is structurally supported, as seen from the perspective of the Tanzanian farmer. In brief, the process and typology of globalization should be examined to shed light on the differential success of nyato and ng'hambo.

The first type, the cultural form of globalization, has existed since time immemorial, with influences from one dominant culture on others ranging from minor to major (acculturation, syncretism, assimilation). By the second, social type of globalization one may think of the increased social interconnectedness and spatio-temporal density of communications (Hannerz). While colonization and imperialism stimulated social globalization in certain parts

of the world, the rapid growth and global spread really began in the postcolonial era. That is also when the cultural and the social form started to operate together. Then we speak of systemic globalization: the many centers of the world that produce a diversity of social and cultural practices increasingly have the one global system as their reference and matrix.

The type of globalization currently underway, with hyper-communicative technologies such as smartphones and Internet and with universally implemented information structures such as universities and media consortia, is unique in human history. To deny its impact on cultural systems, beliefs and practices is naïve. Tacit complicity is a more apt qualification for anthropologists refusing to speak of cultures under pressure or of dying traditions, on the grounds that cultural change is of all times and in a way globalization too: cultures and traditions do not die but evolve, ever blending into new realities, as situated practices, do they not? Social assemblage-theories such as Latour's and even socialization theories such as Bourdieu's, which recognized the socio-structural, power dimension underlying the reproduction of practices, have not sufficiently underscored the extent to which cultures form systems, that is: how the different elements we study as practices, beliefs and institutions hold together as parts of a (complex) whole. Culture, the thing anthropologists study, only obliquely refers to a group of people and their discourses (anthropologists are not primarily interested in people). Culture is something else than a set of opinions, collected in coevalness with the natives, as Fabian was content to propose. Culture is unconscious, experiential, to a large extent non-verbal and pre-linguistic. And like any system, it has a completeness that determines the survival and evolution of its many constituent elements, which feed back into the system. If that feedback capacity is denied, the culture is dying, no matter how successful each of its constituents are in featuring separately, surviving in a folkloric museum or restaurant chain. Then the capacity for a culture's endogenous development is gone. The matter has become acute under the type of globalization we know today, a systemic globalization.