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# Divination “with plants” in West Africa

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Abstract

*The Sèmè make particularly abundant use of plants in the field of divination. Diviners practice their art with the assistance of a bush spirit that comes to live with them at home. Plants serve as material support for settling this bush spirit in the diviner’s home and as powerful objects on the divination scene. Each species of plant plays one or several specific roles. This article is based on extensive field research, and the analysis of the meaning of the plants used in divination (names in the Sèmè language, ritual use). It describes the role of plant species and their symbolic roles in settling the bush spirit in the diviner’s home and during the divination process. Although similar to those of other societies located in the Volta River Basin, the Sèmè divination practices show some original aspects. Keywords: Burkina Faso, Volta River Basin cultural area, Sèmè*

*society, bush spirits, symbolism of plants, ritual practices*

## **Introduction**

Divination is a well-established institution that informs and stimulates ritual acts such as births, marriages, deaths, and initiations in unindustrialized societies (de Surgy 2013). In Africa, specifically, divination is widespread, with practices that are both modified or inherited directly from the past (Peek 1991). It is practiced by people of all ages and socio-professional categories and is based on a complex set of representations relating to social and biological reproduction, the village territory, and invisible beings such as the creator, ancestors, bush spirits and other deities or supernatural forces (de Surgy 1983; Capron 1989; Fournier 2016).

As noted by Peek and van Beek (2013), “The technical forms of divination are legion, and usually involve a randomizing agent or act (throwing or rubbing objects, animals or parts of animals), or the inducement of trance and intuition, which then leads to complex interpretations or calculations.” In the Volta River Basin of West Africa, divination using a wand is widespread, probably an ancient divination process and it is also common to throw cowries (the marine species *Cypraea moneta*, formerly the currency in West Africa) (Liberski-Bagnoud 2012).

In the Volta River Basin cultural area of West Africa, diviners are sought out when people have disturbing dreams or repeated failures and misfortunes. In their eyes, this may indicate that one of the many invisible entities that make up their pantheons is sending them a sign that something must be done (prayer, sacrifice, other ritual acts). In addition, they also seek the diviner as a preventive measure before undertaking an important act. The most common way to become a diviner is to enter into a union with a supernatural entity. This union is sealed by the

construction of an altar for the supernatural entity, often a bush spirit, at the person's home (de Rouville 1984; de Surgy 1986: 61; Fortes 1987:13; Blier 1991; Dugast 2016). Bush spirits (or “génies” in the French translation from local languages) are invisible beings endowed with the power of transformation. They live their lives almost like humans, but their bodies and behavior show distortions and inversions compared with those of humans (Hamberger 2012).

This article demonstrates that plants are essential material supports among the Sèmè of Burkina Faso (West Africa) for building the relationship between a diviner and a bush spirit and in conducting the divination sessions. It explains the symbolism of the plants that are used and presents the beliefs on which this symbolism is based. As shown in the final discussion section, these beliefs constitute the Sèmè version of a core of representations that are shared by the societies of the Volta River Basin.

## **Study Area and Methods**

The Sèmè people of West Africa are concentrated today around the town of Orodara (Figure 1). According to historians, linguists, and anthropologists, their society was constituted in the 17th century from a small group of people originating from Côte d’Ivoire (Person 1966; Prost 1964; Schwartz 1971: 20, 1993:116-119). There is no centralized power above that of the village; the family is patrilineal and residence is virilocal. Their social structure is divided into four social status groups: the farmers, the gravediggers, the blacksmiths, and the griots. Even though Christianity and Islam are today very widespread in Burkina Faso (Langewiesche 2003), the “traditional” religion organized around the *dwo* cult remains very much alive around Orodara (Trost 1999). Studies have been conducted on the natural environments and their management, vernacular names of plants and their main uses (Bene et al. 2014; Fournier et al. 2014; Boyd et

al., 2014). However, there is little documentation about the Sèmè culture and ethnography and even less about their divination practices.

The study is based on a field survey of local specialists known for their knowledge of divination and bush spirits and/or plants and their medicinal and magical uses. The author collected data on divination in Orodara and nearby Sèmè villages between 2010 and 2017. Over a hundred semi-structured interviews were conducted on divination, bush spirits, plants, and their magical and other uses with people over the age of 50 (diviners, healers, heads of families and *dwo* cult officials). Followers of bush spirits and other people reported their experiences as novices, initiators, or observers. Translation into French, was provided by a native speaker knowledgeable of Sèmè traditions. Rich comments were provided by the Sèmè about the vocabulary used in divination and the plant names (Supplementary Table I and II). They also explained the symbolic meanings of the ritual uses of these plants. Recordings made by the author during these interviews also contributed to a study of the Sèmè language conducted by linguists (RADICEL-K program, <http://radicel-k.huma-num.fr/>).

### **Divination method**

Divination takes place in the house of the bush spirit or in the courtyard of the diviner or of the client, who does not explain the reason for his coming. In the divination process, the diviner asks the bush spirit questions, translates the answers and then interprets them for the client. The bush spirit's "words" are materialized by 6 cowries on a flat black stone and by the movements of a forked wand that is rubbed on it. After taking out his materials from his bag (Supplementary Figure 1), the diviner performs gestures of salutation to God and cleans the stone ritually (Supplementary Video 6 s.). Then he checks, from a first series of throws, that each of the

cowries is ready to speak and that the bush spirit is present. He greets the cowries lined up on the stone with small plant “fetishes” (Table 3), which he then deposits on the stone or near it (Supplementary Figures 1, 2, Video<sup>1</sup>). The diviner and the client each hold a branch of the forked wand (Supplementary Video, 1 min 33 s) and while rubbing the wand back and forth on the stone, the diviner asks questions. When his words are true, the wand slides, but when he is mistaken, it stops. Every answer is checked by throwing the cowries (Supplementary Video: 2 min 27 s).

### **Rites for settling the Bush Spirit**

The union of a man with a bush spirit requires that he be “initiated to this bush spirit” and it is the latter, not the man, that makes the decision. A Sèmè person who experiences problems or misfortunes will react by consulting a diviner, who may explain that a bush spirit has decided to settle in the person’s home. This person must then become part of the group of followers of this “bush spirit.” The details of the welcome ceremony for the bush spirit are identified by divination: the *tyéen no* sacred site (“mother of the bush spirit”) where it lives, the day that would be favorable and the plant species that are suitable for making its altars. A small house is then built in the family courtyard and a branch of the *tyéen-kaar* tree (Tables 1, 2) is plunged into the top of its straw roof (Supplementary Figure 3). When the day comes, a group of male followers of this spirit go to the *tyéen no* site to perform a blood sacrifice. Plant material that will be used to settle the bush spirit in the novice’s home is collected along the way, especially two bunches of roots that must be presented at the *tyéen no* site, and one of them is partially burned. As any male novice is potentially a diviner, the items necessary for divination are also presented to the site and activated. Each follower places a crown of the *baarn-byel* liana on his head and the group goes

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<sup>1</sup> *Shel* at 28 s, *dwo fan* and *tutyán* at 43 s and 2 min 46 s, *kool naan dirn* (root of the bush spirit) at 1 min 12 s.

back to the village.

Back at the house of the novice, the initiators will “piquer le génie” [stake down the bush spirit], a French translation by the Sèmè of the special expression *kool kpé*. As there is actually a pair of bush spirits, initiators build a first portico about sixty centimeters high outside the family courtyard, which represents the male spirit. They plant two forked pickets in the ground and place some crosspieces on them. Some of the lianas that were used as crowns are wrapped around the crosspieces and then a branch of *tyéen-kaar* is placed on the lianas. After performing various sacrifices, they build a second portico inside the house representing the female spirit (Supplementary Figure 4). Under this altar, up to three small pots are placed in hollows in the ground and the other bunch of roots (not burned) is deposited in them. A small forked root, which was gathered separately and will form part of the materials used in divination, is placed across one of these pots. The remaining crowns are wrapped around the crosspieces and a branch of *tyéen-kaar* is deposited on them. Other sacrifices are made on the altar and the pots are filled with drinking water for the bush spirit. From now on, they must never remain empty, because the bush spirit is supposed to be living in the house.

During the celebration for the arrival of the bush spirit, guests make small gifts of money or cowries. A woman chosen by divination receives them in a small palm leaf winnowing basket, which she was required to provide. She will eventually keep these gifts for herself, but must first place them on the altar in the house. The initiators hang the winnowing basket under the altar and sometimes add a ritual marriage broom made of grass. They finely grind the bunch of roots already partially charred, swallow a small amount of the powder, and divide up the rest to take home with them. The ceremony ends with a festive meal, prepared and served separately for the followers and the novice on one hand and the family, neighbors and friends on the other. A meal

is also served to the bush spirit in its house, either on the *baarn-byel* lianas on the altar, or in small pieces of broken calabashes arranged on the ground in front of the pots. Generally, the bush spirit requires special food to be served to it, prepared by mixing with water some powdered seeds (white or more rarely red) of the *fel* plant. Unlike the kind of porridge made of Bambara nuts commonly eaten by the Sèmè that it seems to imitate, this dish is left raw. If they were unable to find the seeds of the *fel* plant, they give the bush spirit the same meal as the followers but they ask to be forgiven when presenting it with the *shel* “fetish” (an object endowed with power and used for magico-religious practices). For 5 to 10 days, the bush spirit’s house will then remain ritually closed. During this period, the novice procures, with the assistance of his initiators, objects that may be requested by the bush spirit and plants that must be added to the roots and he begins to learn divination.

After a probationary period of three years, rites identical to those for the reception of the bush spirit are held, except that no more plant material is collected and no one wears a crown. The meal that is served again must include exactly the same dishes for the bush spirit. This stage, called *tyéen no lo*, involves visiting the *tyéen no* sacred site again and making sacrifices to it. If the novice had been involved in witchcraft, the bush spirit would have killed him: to pass this milestone means that the spirit has approved their alliance. The novice can then make sacrifices to the *tyéen no* site without going through the older followers.

### **Catching and “building” the Bush Spirit**

After the construction of a small house, the bush spirit is ritually displaced from the bush into this new dwelling and wooden effigies are built. Why do the Sèmè select specific plant species to perform this?



They say with a touch of humor that, like Muslims who return from Mecca, we must wear a special costume to show what we are doing. The *baarn byel* crown, which suggests a cushion to carry the bush spirit, is worn when it is brought to the novice's home, but not at the confirmation ceremony, because the bush spirit has already moved in. To understand the winding of the liana around the pickets, it is necessary to examine the meaning of the name of this plant. The first etymological comments led to translating *baarn-byel* as "hare's porridge" (Boyd et al. 2014), which seems absurd since the hare does not consume this toxic plant. Some elders explained that *byèl* indeed refers to the porridge that is still liquid before being boiled down and the residue that sticks to the pot. However, as a verb, *byel* describes the act of stirring a mixture of water and flour when thickening a millet porridge. By extension (and as a noun) it describes items consisting of ropes or threads that are inextricably entangled and disorderly. Hence, in this name, *byel* does not suggest a food use, but refers to the tangled appearance of the plant. This is a semi-parasitic liana of greenish or orange color devoid of leaves (Table 1). When it begins to grow, this plant rises and wraps itself around a bush or a shrub, then it falls to the ground and there it spreads out in entangled clusters. Bush spirits use this plant as a rope, as humans do when they use it to tie the pickets for the bush spirit's altar. The hare is associated with this plant because when hunters are seeking game, small animals, especially hares, are chased into the clusters it forms. In addition, hunters fumigate their guns with *baarn-byel* to prevent game from escaping when it sees them. The Sèmè see the hare as the wild animal closest to humans because it lives in the bush, but feeds especially in the fields near their houses. For the Bobo (neighbors of the Sèmè), this behavior makes the hare an agent of liaison and transmission between humans and nature (Sanou 1993: 231). In short, *baarn-byel* is a magic rope that facilitates the capture of wild animals, especially the hare, an animal mediator between the bush and the village, hence its

symbolic importance for bringing a bush spirit from the bush to the homes of humans.

The full name of the bush spirit's altar is *tyéen kan*, but it is often called *tyéen* for short. *Kan*, “leg”, “step” or “stride”, also refers to the distance between a person’s feet when standing up, the lower part of the human body from the waist and the forked handle of a slingshot and, by extension, to any bifurcated object. The Sèmè say that the wooden portico “is the bush spirit” or is “its legs.” On the other hand, they specify that the bush spirit is in no way to be confused with the construction: at most it is seated upon it. It certainly is not shut up inside it and it circulates; this is why the diviner begins consultations by calling his bush spirit to ensure that it is present. The species of tree used for building altars is chosen by divination from a closed list (*komo*, *kukwal*, *wo* and *kpaal*). In principle, one or two trees species are assigned to each *tyéen no* site, however, the bush spirit is free to demand a different species from among these four. These trees were once common and relatively abundant in the savannah. *Komo*, the most frequently used species today, is said to have been the first species used. The stories explaining the preference for particular species have almost all been forgotten. The few short and imprecise stories that could be collected resemble those explaining the clan “totems:” when a tree or animal has given protection against a dangerous animal or an enemy or has provided a supply of edible fruits during a famine, etc., an ancestor of the group decides that his descendants will “respect” the species. Totemic relations imply a food and use prohibition, while in the case of *tyéen no* sites, the use of the species is prescribed for the building of altars. One elder gave another explanation: “it may have simply been the tree under which the bush spirit rested when it was at home.” This refers to a common mode of denomination among the Sèmè. The names of some families or sub-districts originate from that of the big tree under which (or near which) their founder settled.

## Holding the Bush Spirit in Place

A group of plant species called *tyéen-kaar* is used recurrently in the rites of the Sèmè who possess their own botanical classification of these species. They commented on the words that make up their names and on the symbolism of the ritual use of these species. This led us to understand that *tyéen-kaar* serves to hold in place the bush spirit that assists the diviner.

With a combination of five terms, the Sèmè name three species of the *Gardenia* botanical genus (Table 2). They identify a female (*G. erubescens*) and a male form (*G. ternifolia* and *G. aqualla*). They describe the leaves of the first as wider and “well formed” and those of the second as being “cut off”, like the ends of a leper’s limbs, from their more defined contours. According to the linguistic database, *kaar* is the generic form (in the linguistic sense) that designates all three botanical species of *Gardenia*. However, the elders whom we consulted felt that the complete name is *tyéen-kaar*, to which could be added *tiin* (male) or *gnéen* (female). The rare few who distinguished between *G. ternifolia* and *G. aqualla* considered only the first to be male. One of them proposed the name of *tyéen-kaar bobo* for *G. aqualla*, because this plant “serves no purpose” like the deaf-mute (*bobo*), who is said to be “useless”. The male form would be used for ritual purposes only if the other could not be found.

The first term of *tyéen-kaar* is invariably identified as referring to a bush spirit, whereas various interpretations were given to *kaar*. The homophone *kar* (plural *kaar*) refers to various objects in the form of a ring or containing plants with protective properties. These include herbal amulets (bracelets, necklaces, belts) that the Sèmè once always wore. *Kar* also refers to metal bracelets and rings worn as amulets or deposited on altars dedicated to powers related to war, also known as *kar*. In a different context, *kar* is the name of the robust ring of climbing plants (*kpéél*

or *bwoo*) that once held the thatched cone of the roof of houses (Supplementary Figure 3). The compound term *bunkar* (/in a group, *kar*/) refers to the thick ring placed inside and at the top of the conical frame formed by a bundle of *Raphia* palm stipes to maintain and consolidate it (Supplementary Figure 5). It was once always attached with the fibers of the bark of the *tyaal* tree. *Tyaal* fibers are also intertwined in the lower part of the frame where they form other rings (Supplementary Figures 6); their name (*kaar-ja mon*) contains the exact homophone of the term included in *tyéen-kaar*. According to the linguistic database of RADICEL-K program, *kaar* means “liana” and *kar-bo* refers to a clump of lianas, without indication whether *kar* is a generic name. According to our informants, a unique word appears in the vocabulary related to the roof and it means “liana,” but they could not decide if it was *kar* or *kaar*. This could be the name of a particular species of liana (not identified) that grows near creeks. Finally, citing another imperfect homophone, someone went on to joke, “*kaar*, alone, is a scorpion, but it has nothing to do with the plant.” However, to the extent that bush spirits punish those who break the rules by scorpion stings, this joke is worth mentioning.

In different Sèmè rites, the *tyéen-kaar* plant (*Gardenia* species see below) sometimes seems to indicate the meaning of separating things or beings from each other, and sometimes to bring them together. A branch of it stuck into the bush spirit’s house signals a special place, but it also prevents the hens from sitting on the roof, just as the branch on the altar of the male bush spirit prevents goats from climbing on it or rubbing against it. A branch of *tyéen-kaar* is also usually seen on the ancestors' altar: it is said to prevent children from running around in there. At the ceremony that brings about the transformation of a dead person into an ancestor, this branch is always deposited on the altar after the stone that represents the new ancestor (Fournier 2016). When a hunter is threatened by game, he takes refuge under a *tyéen-kaar* tree, because the animal

would never come to attack him there.

Sèmè plant connoisseurs explain that this plant likes to gather together, to unite. They point out that its branches catch the clothes of those who pass by it, as if to seize them. Thus, the main role of the *tyéen-kaar* branches deposited in the places mentioned above is to “assemble,” “gather together,” and “keep together” the humans and invisible beings concerned. Placing this branch means that the moral contract between the bush spirit and its host is sealed. We may suggest that this branch could also separate the domesticated spirit from its fellow bush spirits who remain in the bush.

To give high symbolic value to the *Gardenia* species seems characteristic of West African societies and especially of inhabitants of the Volta River Basin. They represent the *dwo* cult among the Bobo of Burkina Faso (Sanou 2016) and are the seat of the vodou among the Ouatchi of Togo (Hamberger 2011: 436). Among the Winye of Burkina Faso, the *Gardenia* is the ancestor of the trees and it possesses, as among the Sèmè, powers of protection and assembly (Jacob, pers. comm. March 14, 2017). Among the Bwaba of Burkina Faso, they ward off thieves and drive the banished away from the village.

### **Creating Connections with the Bush**

The Sèmè feel that roots are the most powerful parts of the plants; in the rite described, they use them to create or reinforce connections with the bush. The nature of the roots and the way they are gathered are some of the most secret aspects of the rites, but we were able to gather some information. The roots that are kept immersed in water in the pots (*kool naan diir*, in the plural) are from one or more of the four species dedicated to the *tyéen no* sacred sites. In some cases, they would be the same species as the pickets used for the altar, while in others, the choice

would be made by divination. However, the mixture is apparently completed by other roots gathered near a termite mound or an anthill, places known to be haunted by the bush spirits. They may also be roots of plants that have grown at the market or across a road, places where everyone goes by. This enables them to “see and hear everything” which helps the diviner to detect the truth.

Followers gave concrete (but metaphorical) explanations for using these roots. Some said that trees only stand upright (*ja*) owing to their roots, hence some must be added to the pickets of the altar. For followers of certain sacred sites, pots and roots are always placed before building the altar because the roots necessarily come before the tree, whereas followers of other sacred sites place the pots after building the altars. The roots are placed in the pots while the altar is left visible, because in the bush the roots are hidden in the soil while the branches are “things on high.” The Sèmè say that a man or a bush spirit, just like a tree, “only stands on its roots.” It is a way of referring to the many “medications” (almost always root-based) with which they surround themselves for protection from attacks by witches. When a Sèmè talks about someone's roots, he is also referring to his network of relationships, his family, and all the financial and other support from which he may benefit. This is a representation shared by the societies of the Volta River Basin, such as for example, the Winye of Burkina Faso who also consider fetishes to be trees, with roots, like men and bush spirits (Jacob, pers. comm. March 14, 2017).

In addition, bush spirits, who do not mind drinking simple water when they turn into humans, refuse water in which there are no roots immersed when they assume their true form of beings from the bush. Roots transform this water, which becomes like the water of rivers (which always flow over roots), and make it suitable for consumption by bush spirits as they are. The mediating power of roots is confirmed in other uses of this water. The follower and his wife must

from time to time rub it on their heads, faces and bodies as a greeting to the spirit and a request for its protection. If a follower is unable to do this for more than twenty days, he requests one of his brothers to ask for the forgiveness of the spirit by placing a *shel* fetish on the path he took when leaving. When babies cry or have a fever, it is understood to be the result of the fear caused by the bush spirits they see, an ability that older children and adults lose. They simply have to be rubbed with this water to stop the problem. These roots thus seem to have the power to introduce the bush into the village.

*Kool naan dirn* (in the singular) is a root, or sometimes a branch, of 5 to 10 centimeters long that may also be forked at one end. It is placed temporarily across one pot in the house and then forms part of the materials for divination (Supplementary Video: 1 min 10 s). It is always prominently displayed and is referred to during a divination. Diviners say that it “summarizes” (*a tobra* or *yen*) the roots placed in the pots and recalls the altar. Indeed, it is impossible to undertake divination without this root, which is the “door that provides access to divination.” It “forces the truth to come out” or “directs” one towards the truth or “puts one on the right path” (*a bré hlo gnaal taa*). Only roots from among the four dedicated species of the *tyéen no* sites may be used, the most frequent being *komo*.

Each new follower receives a “divination tail” (*sé-daar*) (Supplementary Video: the small cloth bag at 1 min 33 s). Different groups of followers have their own way of making it, but a dough made of plant tubers seems to be the main component (and sometimes wild yams called *kursana*). The mixture may be sewn inside the skin of the testicle of the animal sacrificed to the *tyéen no* site, but there are other forms. The collective noun *sé-daar bar mon* describes various plants that form part of it, making it possible to refer to them without revealing their identity. On pain of being punished by the bush spirit, the follower must wear his *sée-dar* on him whenever he

leaves home: the object signifies his bond with the bush spirit and protects him from threats originating from the invisible world.

## The Plants of the Oracle

To set up the divination scene, the diviner manipulates plant parts and objects or substances of plant origin. The relation of these objects and plant parts to the bush spirits and the *dwo* cult must now be described.

During divination, a forked wand delivers the “words” of the bush spirit. This essential object is made from a tree taken from the bush (Table 3). Its wood must be very hard because if it breaks during divination, the diviner or the client will die. In the past, various species were used, including *kpéél*, but today only the more abundant thorny bush *bibli* is used. Bush spirits like it because they can hide in it and keep their belongings out of reach of humans.

When the diviner holds his divination in the house of the bush spirit, he lays the divination stone on a fixed stand made of adobe (Supplementary Video: 1 min 54). If he works elsewhere, he places it on a small portable support called *kool gniné mon* (/genie, to sit, thing/ literally, a thing for the genie to sit on), which must necessarily be made of the wood of the palmyra palm (Supplementary Figure 2, Video: 1 min 33 s).

When the followers ingest the powder made of the charred, ground roots before performing a divination, their words flow more smoothly and it helps them to “tell the truth,” but the need for it decreases for seasoned specialists. The diviners of certain groups of followers use it to permeate the cloth cap of the horn in which the cowries are kept. By scrubbing the stone on which they throw the cowries with this cloth each morning or before each new divination, they cleanse it (*a ta kukuur*) ritually (Supplementary, Video: 8 to 20 s) and avoid clouding the work of



the oracle. Another purifying option is to make the cowries “drink” this powder once and for all during the activation of the divination materials and then use a simple cloth. The diviners gave us to understand that *wo* (one of the dedicated species of the *tyéen no* sites) is often part of the mixture.

Setting up the divination scene requires calling the bush spirits with two metal bells and disclosing five plant fetishes. Two identical *shel*, which are made of a simple folded ribbon of palmyra palm leaf, usually flank the divination stone to assist with the smooth progress of the divination. *Shel* has a soothing effect and removes possible dangers from the world of the invisible, especially wandering souls. It would have been passed on to the first diviner by the *dye-roon* (village chief) who himself would have received it directly from the bush spirits. The other objects have the role of channeling the capricious nature of the bush spirit, which can indeed sulk and “tell lies” as soon as it thinks that the diviner is failing to perform his duties towards it. *Kool la kpa*, the half-pod of the *kpaal* fruit (Supplementary Video: 1 min 33 s), is used by bush spirits as a cup for drinking. Just like a threat commonly uttered against humans over their calabashes, the words said over this object expose the bush spirits to stomach aches if they tell lies. The *dwo fan* fetish, a small piece of the petiole of a palmyra palm leaf, suggests the male section of the *dwo* cult, and can make a wrongdoer bloat “to the size of a house.” *Tutya*, a tiny bundle of grasses used for roofing and tied in three places, suggests the feminine section of the *dwo* cult and exposes liars to having their “fingers cut off” (leprosy), or to the total blockage of their urinary and intestinal excretions. These threats are also directed at the diviner.

### **The Matrimonial Metaphor by Plants**

Settling a bush spirit in the diviner’s home is metaphorically described as a marriage.

Several objects made of plants that are used in the rites allude to the three stages of the marriage, which the Sèmè assimilate with the initiation of women to the *dwo* cult.

The little winnowing basket hung under the altar of the female bush spirit is an explicit reference to the one in which adolescents receive gifts from their family and friends during their rites of passage. The woman who holds it also alludes to the woman who provides and carries the *kukwan* basket in which are placed the gifts for a girl during the first stage (*tyèl*) of her marriage.

The palmyra palm tree, the leaves of which are used to weave the winnowing basket and the basket, is cultivated in the Orodara region because it is a little further North of its natural area of distribution. Its economic value is important (fruits, sap for wine, stipes for building, leaves for basketry). Its symbolic value is also very strong, suggesting both the ancestors and initiation. Palmyra palm trees belong to the heads of families and thus ritual objects made with its leaves are powerful and some are dedicated to the *dwo* cult.

The raw food (*fel*) offered to the bush spirit suggests the *fyè*, a small quantity of food presented to the “luck” of the wife during the second stage of marriage (*fyè gbe*). The “fetish of luck” is placed in the courtyard of their fathers for men, in that of their husbands for women. The meal prepared by the woman chosen by divination is served only to the bush spirit and its followers, just as the one prepared with *fyè* is only for initiates during a wedding.

The Sèmè do not remember the story of the arrival of *fel* and they present this plant as inedible and of foreign origin. Some elders cultivate it at home to have it at hand when needed, a common practice for rare, useful plants. *Fel* is the Lima bean which, according to Tourte (no date), was among the first introductions of American plants on the West African coast. It apparently spread throughout the interior of the continent, but especially in the northern fringes of the forest because, in the savannah, the cowpea, which is well adapted to the environment and

meets the needs of the people perfectly, continues to dominate. The plant seems to have been adopted the Sèmè only for mystical uses (e.g. protection against witches). The Gurunsi of Burkina Faso, who also belong to the Volta River Basin cultural area, use it for the same purpose (Saïbou Nignan, pers. comm., November 2016).

The “divination tail” has been equated by elders to a traditional lamp used during the third and final stage of marriage (*tyel-de*). This is because both have power against witches and are given to the man who assumes responsibility for the marriage.

## **Discussion**

The conjunction of the visible and invisible worlds in the house of the bush spirit is a crucial expected effect of the rites introducing a bush spirit into a human home. As transpositions of objects used daily by humans, some of the plant parts used in the rites illustrates this conjunction. They allude to the lives of bush spirits in the bush: the latter’s houses are trees, their ropes are lianas, they drink the water of rivers in wild tree pods, etc. For the Sèmè, the bush is a metaphor of the bush spirits invisible world. In the representations of the inhabitants of the cultural area of the Volta River Basin, the village and the bush are strongly contrasted, the village being the domain of humans and social activities, while the bush is that of invisible beings and the place of all dangers. However, the bush is also a place of nourishment and economic value, where fields are open and many wild resources are collected for food, crafts, medical care and so on. The languages of the societies of the West African savannah stress this by using the same word for the natural vegetation and the fields. In the same way, bush spirits have two faces: they have certainly instilled in humans all their practical and spiritual knowledge, but punish them when they do not comply with the rules and sometimes take pleasure in misleading their steps or

their minds. It is understandable therefore, that transferring a bush spirit from the bush to the house of a diviner is a particularly delicate operation.

The introduction of a bush spirit into the human world mimics the gradual stages of the Sèmè marital union. Such a marital metaphor expressing the individual link established between a human and a supernatural entity is widespread throughout Africa, but it is extended by the Sèmè in unusual detail. Several objects made with plants (baskets, “divination tail”), as well as the plant food of the bush spirit allude to marriage. The effigy of the bush spirit is a token of the transformation of the bush spirit into a domesticated being able to live with humans and like them in a house. Different methods may be adopted to build it in the societies of the Volta River Basin cultural area. Among the Sèmè it is simply made of the wood of a specific tree species, while among the Bwaba, it is made of earth (Dugast 2015a).

In their reading of various ethnographic aspects in other societies of the Volta River Basin, some authors (Cartry 1979; Bonnet 1981; Hamberger 2012) have concluded that the bush spirit transports its bush world with it. Among the Sèmè, the rites indeed transform the bush spirit's house into a singular and permanent enclave where the world of the village and that of the bush become compatible with each other. Furthermore, the symbolic link thus established between the bush and the house of the bush spirit also extends to the divination scene, wherever the latter may be located. A plant object fulfills this role: a small root readily visible on the divination scene, which is supposed to “sum up” the ritual objects kept in the bush spirit’s house.

Some other societies in the Volta River Basin have similar ways of materializing with plants the place of origin of the power at work in divination. One option is topological (wood from a particular sacred place), another is botanical (wood from a particular tree species). Among the Kasena the option is topological and the divination wand is carved from a tree growing in one

of the sacred groves that are anchor points of social groups; the oracular power is supposed to originate from this grove (Liberski-Bagnoud 2010a). Among the Bwaba (Dugast 2015a), the option is botanical: the earth effigy of the bush spirit always includes an inner frame of wood that ensures its solidity. In the region of Bondoukuy (unpublished surveys related to this project), it is chosen from a closed list of five species by means of a divination sacrifice of chickens. This would be the species of the tree under which the spirit lived but the place is not specified. The Sèmè combine the topological and botanical options. Their wooden effigies of bush spirits, made of specific plant species, in addition symbolically connect the diviner to well-defined natural sacred sites in the bush, which are the anchor points to the territory of the sub-districts or the extended families that make up the clans of Sèmè society (Fournier 2016).

The Sèmè bush spirits are thought to assemble the various constituents of the human to be born and hence to have an intimate knowledge of human beings, which is crucial in divination (Fournier 2016). The idea of bush spirits that shape humans is also found among the Bassar (Dugast 2009)<sup>2</sup> while among the Kassena the grove that provides the power of divination is also symbolically the place of origin of human groups and the source of its children (Liberski-Bagnoud 2010a)<sup>3</sup>.

In addition, among the Sèmè, some of the plant fetishes handled on or around the stone during divination adhere to the cult of the *dwo*, a supernatural entity supposed to have come from the bush. The *dwo* institution, which is central in Sèmè society, also exists in similar forms among several other societies in the Volta River Basin (Petridis 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> See also Michel Cartry's summary (2010).

<sup>3</sup> However, the supernatural oracular agency does not necessarily spring from the place of origin of the diviner's group (Liberski-Bagnoud, 2010b)

## Conclusion

This article demonstrated how the Sèmè initiate their new diviners and how they ritually establish the links that are required by divination between the world of humans and the world of the bush and the supernatural. By using plants, they seek a bush spirit in the bush, build an image of it, establish an alliance between it and the novice diviner it will assist, confirm this alliance, and protect them both. By using plants, they also set up the divination scene and obtain “the truth” during divination. Some of these plants are emblems common to society as a whole, with reference in particular to initiation to the *dwo* cult and marriage. Others are identity markers of the sacred sites that are territorial anchors origin and of clans or families. The Sèmè think that the bush spirit that live in these sacred sites assemble the components of the persons to be born and guide their personal destiny. Thus, to go into the details of the role of plants in the rituals relating to divination is also to access the representations of the Sèmè and their own way of articulating among themselves the central institutions of their society. The representations underlying the Sèmè practices described are also found in several other societies of the Volta River Basin cultural area. However, the use of plants by the Sèmè in this context is exceptionally abundant. Other societies in Africa practice “divination by plants” in which the oracle is rendered directly by parts of plants or vegetable matter (James 2013; Ba 2016). The Sèmè stand out from those other African societies in that they practice rather a “divination with plants”. The plants do not participate directly in the oracular process (with the exception of the divination wand). They are only companions, but essential companions.

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## Supplementary material



Figure 1: A diviner's materials, Orodara region (November 23, 2014)



Figure 2: The *totyan* and *dwo-fan* fetishes at a divination, Orodara region (November 3, 2011)



Figure 3: Little branch of *tyèèn-kaar* and a ring *kar* on the roof of a little house of the bush spirit (Orodara, December 6, 2014)



Figure 4: Altar for a bush spirit set up in a house in a district of Orodara (November 13, 2016)



Figure 5: Interior ring *bunkar* on a damaged roof (Orodara region, June 25, 2016)  
Anneau intérieur *bunkar* visible sur un toit détérioré (Région d'Orodara, 25 juin 2016)



Figure 6: Interlacing *kaar-ja mon* on a damaged roof, Orodara region (June 25, 2016)  
Entrelacement *kaar-ja mon* visible sur un toit détérioré, région d'Orodara (25 juin 2016)

Video “Use of plants in divination” (3 min 12 s), ©IRD - Anne Fournier,  
[https://irdmail.fr/Redirect/CA6FE441/www.audiovisuel.ird.fr/index.php?urlaction=doc&id\\_doc=11459&rang=1](https://irdmail.fr/Redirect/CA6FE441/www.audiovisuel.ird.fr/index.php?urlaction=doc&id_doc=11459&rang=1)

The short sequences presented are extracts from four divination sessions conducted by four different diviners. They show the routine use of the plant material mentioned in the text. These gestures remain the same whatever the subject of the divination.

## Supplementary Material

Table I. Names of the plants cited: script in the International Phonetic Alphabet

Latin binomials	Simplified script	International phonetics	Comments
<i>Abrus precatorius</i> L.	<i>shunshuun</i>	ʃũnʃuùn	
<i>Andropogon chinensis</i> (Nees) Merr.	<i>gniin</i>	ɲí!ín	
<i>Andropogon pseudapricus</i> Stapf	<i>gniin</i>	ɲí!ín	
<i>Azelia africana</i> Sm. ex Pers.	<i>kpaal</i>	kpa!al	
<i>Borassus aethiopum</i> Mart.	<i>kpeén</i>	kpeén	
<i>Cassytha filiformis</i> L.	<i>baarn-byel</i>	baárn-byɛl	/hare, possessive, porridge/
<i>Dichrostachys cinerea</i> (L.) Wight & Arn	<i>blibli</i>	blibli	
<i>Eragrostis tremula</i> (Lam.) Hochst. ex Steud	<i>janjur</i>	jànjūr	
<i>Dioscorea abyssinica</i> Hochst. ex Kunth	<i>kursana</i>	kursána	
<i>Diospyros mespiliformis</i> Hochst. ex A.DC.	<i>komo</i>	kɔ̃mɔ̃	
<i>Eragrostis tremula</i> (Lam.) Hochst. ex Steud	<i>djanjur</i>	jànjūr	broom
<i>Gardenia aqualla</i> Stapf & Hutch.	<i>tyéen-kaar tiin</i>	tyé!én-ka!ar tíĩ	/genie, ring ?, male/
“ “	<i>tyéen-kaar bobo</i>	tyé!én-ka!ar bobó	/genie, ring ?, deaf-mute/
<i>Gardenia erubescens</i> Stapf & Hutch.	<i>tyéen-kaar gnéén</i>	tyé!én-ka!ar ɲé!én*	/genie, ring ?, female/
<i>Gardenia ternifolia</i> Schumach. & Thonn.	<i>tyèèn-kaar tiin</i>	tyé!én-ka!ar tíĩ*	/genie, ring ?, male/
<i>Khaya senegalensis</i> (Desr.) A. Juss.	<i>téen</i>	té!én	/mahogany tree

<i>Landolphia dulcis</i> (Sabine) Pichon	<i>kpéél-tokplaa</i>	<b>kpé!él-tókpláá</b>	<i>/kpéél, burial/</i>
<i>Landolphia heudelotii</i> A.DC.	<i>kpéél</i>	<b>kpé!él</b>	
<i>Pericopsis laxiflora</i> (Benth.) Meeuwen	<i>kukwal ou kpokpal</i>	<b>kúkwal, kpókpal</b>	
<i>Phaseolus lunatus var utilis</i> L.	<i>fel</i>	<b>fel</b>	
<i>Pteleopsis suberosa</i> Engl. & Diels	<i>tyaal</i>	<b>tya!al</b>	
<i>Saba senegalensis</i> (A.DC.) Pichon	<i>bwoo</i>	<b>bwo!ó</b>	
<i>Schizachyrium sanguineum</i> (Retz.) Alston	<i>gniin</i>	<b>ni!in</b>	
<i>Zanthoxylum zanthoxyloides</i> (Lam.) Zepern. & Timler	<i>wo</i>	<b>wó</b>	

Table II: Other terms in Roman and the International Phonetic Alphabet

<b>Roman script</b>	<b>International phonetic script</b>	<b>Translation</b>
<i>a bré hlo gnaal taa</i>	a bré hlõ ɲáàl tǎá	/it sets truth road on/ literally, it puts one on the right path
<i>a ta kukuur</i>	a ta kūkúūr	/it, on, to clean or to delete/ literally, it cleans (the divination stone)
<i>a tobra</i>	a tōbra	it summarizes, to summarize (to gather)
<i>a yen</i>	a yén	it summarizes (to show)
<i>bètaar biin</i>	bètáàr b̥i̯n	/winnowing basket little/literally, little winnowing basket
<i>bonoo</i>	bónóò	a personal fetish of luck possessed by everyone
<i>bunkar</i>	bùnkār	(/in a group, kar/) a ring of plant material placed inside the point of the roof
<i>dèe</i>	dèe	a spouse, a husband
<i>donoblè</i>	dónòblè	the initiation stage for men in the <i>dwo</i> cult
<i>dwo</i>	dwó	the initiation cult shared by several West African societies
<i>dwo-fan</i>	dwó-fan	a little fetish made of a palmyra palm stipe that forms part of the divination materials
<i>dwo-fwoo</i>	dwó-fwǎ!ó!ó	one of the sacred groves of the <i>dwo</i>



<i>dwoɥe gbe</i>	dwoɥe gbē	/dwo, dolo, pour-put/ literally, pour the dolo of the <i>dwo</i> , the initiation stage for men in the <i>dwo</i> cult
<i>dye-roon</i>	dyē-ró!ón	the village chief, authority with a mainly political role
<i>fyè</i>	fyè	a small quantity of food used ritually during the second stage of marriage
<i>fyè gbe</i>	fyè gbē	/fyè to place/ literally “to place the <i>fyè</i> “, that is, a part of the food, the second stage of marriage
<i>ngmil ta kool</i>	ŋmīl ta kóol	A personal genie that guides the soul and intervenes in the birth of every new human being
<i>gna-fléé</i>	ɲá-f!élé	/eye to sprout or to split/ literally, to pierce the eyes, open the eyes), the initiation stage of the <i>dwo</i>
<i>gnaan-toon</i>	ɲá!án-tó!ón	the earth chief, an authority with a mainly religious role
<i>gnyèèl kar</i>	ɲēél kār	/rope to cut/ literally, to cut the rope, a ritual to end the period of mourning for widows
<i>ja</i>	jà	to grasp
<i>Jonosoo</i>	Jòndòsóo	God (the creator)
<i>kaar</i>	kāár	scorpion
<i>kar</i>	kār	amulet made with plants, a ring made of plant material that is placed around a roof frame
<i>kar-bo</i>	kār-bō	cluster of lianas perhaps the name of a species (unidentified)
<i>kaar-ja mon</i>	ká!ár-jà món	/creeper, grasp, thing/ literally, thing for the frame) a ring of interlaced plant

		material placed inside a roof frame
<i>kle</i>	klē	to do
<i>kono-gnée</i>	kón!ó-ɲéē	/ancestor, to place/, literally, place the ancestor, a ceremony where a stone is placed on the altar of the ancestors
<i>kool gniné mon</i>	kóòl ɲíné-món	/genie, to sit, thing/ literally, a thing for the genie to sit on) the seat of the genie
<i>kool kpé</i>	koòl kpé	“Piquer le genie” “stake down the genie”
<i>kool la kpa</i>	kóòl lā kpá	/genie, to drink, calabash/ literally, the calabash for the genie to drink from
<i>kool naan diir</i>	kóòl nāán dīir	the roots of the genie (/genie, wood roots/), placed in the water in small pots
<i>kool naan dirn</i>	kóòl nāán dīrn	the root of the genie (/genie, wood, root/), forked root, accessory for divination
<i>kukwan</i>	kùkwàn	a basket made of palmyra palm used during the <i>tyèl</i>
<i>mukaal</i>	múkààl	the name of a sort of porridge usually eaten by the Sèmè
<i>sé-daar</i>	sé-d!á!ár	/divination tail/ literally, tail for divination, a portable “fetish” containing plants
<i>sé-daar bar mon</i>	sé-d!á!ár bār món	/divination, tail, to plug [or wrap around], thing/ literally, the thing that plugs the divination tail), collective name for plants used to make the <i>sé-daar</i>
<i>sé-ti</i>	sé-tí	/divination, stick/, divination wand
<i>sèmè jèèn</i>	sèmè jéen	the Sèmè language
<i>shel</i>	ʃēl	a little fetish made of a knot of a palmyra palm leaf
<i>Téenton</i>	Téenton	“Under-the-mahogany”, the name of a district

<i>to</i>	tō	father
<i>tutya</i>	túty!à	a little “fetish” made of <i>nin</i> grass that forms part of the materials for divination
<i>tyéen kan</i>	tyé!én kàn	/genie leg/ literally, the leg of the genie) wooden altar of the genie
<i>tyéen no lo</i>	tyé!én nō l!ō	(/genie, mother, show/ literally, honor the mother of the genie) second ritual to welcome the genie
<i>tyèl</i>	tyèl	the first stage of initiation for adolescents that once included excision and circumcision
<i>tyèl-dé</i>	tyèl-dé	/ marriage to enter/ literally, to enter into a marriage, third and last stage of the marriage and the initiation for women

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