

SEEKING VOICES AND FINDING MEANING: AN ANALYSIS OF PORTUGUESE VERBAL DIVINATION

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Among the numerous charms and incantations collected by late 19th and early 20th-century Portuguese folklorists and ethnographers, there are a small number which are intended to be used in verbal divination. These procedures, at times referred to as *andar às vozes* (seeking voices), while being words of power in themselves, are effectively meant to attribute power and significance to whatever random words or sounds are heard immediately after being recited. Being divination procedures, they present a question and answer structure between a performer and a supernatural entity. In these processes, certain cues or ‘manifestation avenues’ are offered for the called upon supernatural entity to manifest and provide an answer to the performer. As such, the analysis of these (and other) divination procedures can help map the relationships between performers and supernatural entities. Particularly, these can help discern what the accepted manifestations of spirits are during any such divination for a performer, and what implications this may have for other aspects of folk magic.

Keywords: absorption hypothesis, cognitive science of religion, divination, domination magic, manipulation magic, J. Leite de Vasconcelos, love magic, saints

INTRODUCTION

From the numerous verbal magic procedures collected by the great late 19th and early 20th-century Portuguese ethnographers and folklorists, a restricted set of divination procedures require particular attention due to their suggested functioning. While being divination procedures with a standard question-and-answer structure, they stand out due to their verbal nature and the establishment of a kind of vocabulary of communication to be used by an addressed supernatural entity in its communication with the performer.

Analyzing the references to these procedures by the ethnographer José Leite de Vasconcelos (1858–1941), given their verbal nature and their common recourse to saints as their addressed supernatural entity, they are commonly referred to as either *rezas* or *orações* (1985: 485), both of which can be translated as ‘prayers’. Under this category of prayer, two different forms of these divination procedures can nonetheless be detected. The first functions by the performer posing a question to a supernatural entity, either for himself or a client, simultaneously supplying a vocabulary and accepted avenue to be used to frame the answer. Subsequently, the answer is received through an otherwise random event which is deemed significant in light of the vocabulary provided and is interpreted as the manifestation of the addressed supernatural entity (Figure 1a). In the second form, the performer puts a question to a supernatural entity, offering once again its accepted vocabulary of answer, and this is perceived as responding directly to him without necessary recourse to any manifestation in the material world (Figure 1b).

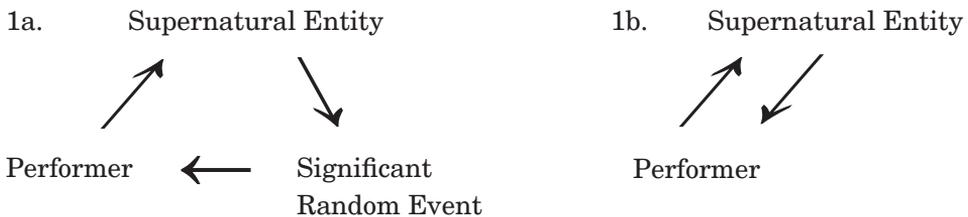


Fig. 1a. Verbal divination structure dependent on an external random event.
Fig. 1b. Verbal divination structure not dependent on a random event.

The study of these procedures (as in fact most divination methods) can offer various insights into a variety of fields of religious studies, from contemporary cognitive studies of religion to the academic study of western esotericism. Focusing on the first, from the perspective of cognitive studies, analyses of divination procedures can offer interesting illustrations and even alternatives to the processes of attribution of agency and causality. Within cognitive theory, religion can be (at least in part) understood as a mechanism for the attribution of meaning and agency to random events (Luhmann et al. 2010: 67). Such a theory is typically backed by evolutionary arguments in that interpreting sounds and movements in the wild as being the products of an active agent, such as a predator, is overall more conducive to survivability than simply dismissing such random events as irrelevant (Gray & Wegner 2010: 9). Following this idea, one can possibly also understand religion as a method of offering order

to the world by ascribing motive and a certain human-like thought process to its randomness.

This process however depends on a very specific order of attribution of agency and causality, as proposed by Ann Taves (2008: 129). It is firstly necessary for agency to be attributed to a given perception or sensation, only after which causality can be attributed between the agent and the event. Based on this theory, the different forms of divination presented below can be understood equally as methods for the attribution of meaning and agency to random events. This means that whether you perform the divination prayer or not, in all likelihood the responses perceived as being given by the addressed supernatural entity would happen all the same, but the fact that the prayer was performed inflates this otherwise meaningless event with significance and agency.

From the perspective of the study of western esotericism, a relevant point which can also be deduced from the study of folk divination procedures is that they offer a particular model for spirit communication which can be placed in antithesis to more modern and contemporary forms of communication, such as those found in Kardecism, Spiritualism or in movements derived from the 19th-century Occult Revival, such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn or the Theosophical Society. In such groups or movements, several techniques involving meditation, trance, visualization, altered states of consciousness and the use of creative imagination are employed as a base for spirit communication. All of these can be seen to be typical of literary and upper layers of society and most of them can actually be traced to Renaissance authors such as Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino and their considerations on the use and reality of the imagination (Van Den Doel & Hanegraaff 2006: 610–611). This same strand can be equally traced across Paracelsus (Van Den Doel & Hanegraaff 2006: 612) in the 16th century and Eliphas Levi (Van Den Doel & Hanegraaff 2006: 614) in the 19th, eventually leading to its use in the Golden Dawn as a cornerstone for spirit contact (Luhrmann 1989a: 41), and consequently contemporary Western Mystery Schools (Luhrmann 1989b: 134) and Witchcraft (Luhrmann 1985: 158). As conceptualized by Luhrmann, these types of methods translate a process of ‘absorption’, a process by which the individual focuses on a mental object while diminishing his/her attention on the everyday events of mundane life (Luhrmann et al. 2010: 75).

In contrast, the prayers presented function by a completely opposite process. The individual focuses on the everyday events of mundane life, given the particular place and influence over these same events spirits are assumed to have (or are given) in this folk environment. The ‘non-inner’, or non-mental or psychological nature of spirits here, as translated by these divination procedures, equally means that they do not rely on any form of altered state of consciousness

or any particular 'inner' skill for the establishment of spirit communication. Consequently, the form of perceived communication and the answers following from these prayers all become extremely tangible and unambiguous. This does not mean, however, that the answers obtained by these folk methods are themselves unambiguous, but rather that the method of interpretation to do with whether or not a spirit message/answer was received or not is completely unambiguous. The spirit answer is itself completely analogical and sensorial.

Beyond these two aspects, this paper hopes to further address the relationship established between the performer and his referred supernatural entity: what the 'vocabulary' supplied for communication may signify in this traditional environment and the possible ramifications of this in the reading of other related folk magic procedures.

GETTING SPIRITS TO TALK BACK: FROM DIVINATION TO MANIPULATION

Given their reference as 'prayers', and before we proceed to analyse these forms of divination themselves, it is fundamental to distinguish the particular form of divination described in Figure 1b (of direct questions and answers between a performer and a supernatural entity) from regular orthodox religious prayer, particularly that of contemporary American Evangelical Christianity. The problem here is that in this particular Christian denomination believers are expected to engage in an active dialogue with God as a form of prayer, the structure of which can be equally described by Figure 1b. To distinguish these two types of dialogical engagement with a supernatural entity, as described by Tanya Luhrmann (2010: 66–67), it should be noted that Christian Evangelicals require a considerable amount of learning and training in order to become efficient in this type of conversational prayer. Associated with this is also a whole series of mental hurdles to be overcome in order for a practitioner in this context to effectively perceive that he is having a dialogue with God (interested readers should refer to Luhrmann's 2012 *When God Talks Back*). In contrast, the forms of verbal divination analysed in this paper require no actual process of 'faith' or any form of 'mental gymnastics' to be perceived as being effective by their performer. As already mentioned, the answers provided by these methods are all, from a sensorial perspective, extraordinarily tangible and unambiguous and largely do not require any process of learning or belief in order to be performed, only to be accepted.

Looking now directly into these particular forms of divination, from the simplest to the most complex, the one which seems to be the clearest, in terms of

methodology and functioning, can be found in the book *Diabruras, Santidades e Profecias* (1894: 111) by Teixeira da Aragão. Yet, the sources mentioned in this book reveal that this procedure was in fact taken from the 1731 Inquisition process of D. Paula Teresa de Miranda Souto-Maior.¹ Analyzing the original document, the procedure can be seen to go as follows:

Para saber se qualquer pessoa era viva ou morta, punha-se á janela passando uma contas e dizendo: ‘Côrte do Céu ouvi-me, côrte do Céu falae-me, côrte do Céu respondi-me’. Esperava as primeiras palavras bues se dissessem na rua, e n’ellas estava a resposta do que desejava saber.

In order to know if any person was alive or dead, she would place herself at her window going through / [praying] some beads and saying: ‘Court of Heaven hear me, court of Heaven speak to me, court of Heaven answer me’. She would wait for the first words said on the street and in them was the answer she wanted.

If we break down its structure we see that the performer addresses a supernatural entity (in this case the ‘court of Heaven’) with a question and a ‘trigger formula’; random words are spoken on the street; these are interpreted as the concrete message or manifestation of the supernatural entity and are taken as containing the sought answer.

As stated, this being the simplest form of verbal divination found, all remaining prayers present an increasing level of complexity and internal structure. The second example, collected on an unknown date and at an unknown location by Zófimo Consiglieri Pedroso (2007: 207), is specifically addressed by this scholar as *andar ás vozes*, or, ‘seeking voices’. The procedure seems to be slightly more ritualistic than the previous one, and Consiglieri Pedroso mentions that this could be performed in two different ways: the first of these at any hour of the day, by going out into the streets after its recitation and actively ‘seeking voices’ containing an answer; the second, at the hour of the Trinities (six o’clock in the afternoon), by simply standing at your window (a liminal space, similar to the first example) and passively waiting for the voices to reach you. In either case, the prayer to be recited is presented as the same:

Meu S. Zacarias!
Mau santo bendito!
Foste cego, surdo e mudo;
Tiveste um filho e o nome lhe puseste – João;
Declara-me nas vozes do povo
My St Zachariah!
My blessed saint!
You were blind, deaf and mute;

*You had a son and you called him John;
Declare to me in the voices of the people*

In this vein, having a particular association with space and time (but less structure), are a number of procedures described by Teófilo Braga, which he also refers to as *andar ás vozes* (1994: 73–74). Interestingly, besides the question being divined upon, these no longer have any form of prescribed verbal cue to trigger the attribution of significance to a random event. These procedures mostly seem to be associated with religious events or spaces, in that attending or going to a religiously charged practice or space will provide the circumstances for the answer to a particular question to be found. The first of these is from Foz do Douro (municipality of Porto):

[---] elas traziam a outras cachopas de São João à quartas-feiras, e da Virgem do Monte às sextas-feiras, que vão mudas à romaria, espreitando o que diz a gente que passa; donde afirmam que lhes não falta a resposta dos seus embustes [---]

[---] *they would bring other girls from São João on Wednesdays, and from Virgem do Monte on Fridays, going mute to pilgrimages, observing what passerby say; from which they claim they will have no lack of answer for their wiles* [---]

The second from São Miguel (Azores):

Quando qualquer pessoa quer saber notícias que lhe hão-de vir de uma amante, vai de noite num passeio até ao adro da igreja em que está o Santo Cristo, rezando numas contas e com outra pessoa atrás para ir ouvindo melhor o que se diz pelo caminho e dentro das casa, e isto sem que nenhuma delas diga uma só palavra. Quando voltam vêm combinando o que ouviram e dali concluem que novas hão-de vir.

When any person wishes to know news that are to come of a lover, they go at night on a walk to a churchyard which has the Holy Christ, praying some beads and with some company following behind so as to better hear what is being said along the way, inside houses, and this without any of them saying a word. When they return they combine what they heard and from it they conclude what news is to follow.

Once again, no form of specialized verbal cue seems to be involved beyond the praying with 'beads' (likely a rosary), which is also mentioned in the 1731 prayer described above. The third from Porto:

[---] vai-se rezar à porta da Sé, à Senhora das Verdades, e no caminho é que se colhe as vozes.

[---] *one prays at the door of the See, to the Lady or Truths, and on the way back collect voices.*

Of the more structured types of divination, the ones which seem to be the most common typically do not allow the same flexibility of answers given by the use of random words as the procedures so far presented. This aspect in particular can be noted as a fundamental point which can be understood to distinguish between the prayers and procedures so far presented and the ones set out below. The following, collected by José Leite de Vasconcelos (1985: 485) in Lageosa (municipality of Sabogal), implies a different type of functioning, while nonetheless requiring a random event to be made effective:

Santa Helena, rainha de Sena, moura foste, para a cristandade voltaste, com onze mil virgens te encontraste, com elas vos comprimentasteis, três raminhos de salsa verde cortaste, com a cruz de Christo sonhaste, três cravos que tinha três cravos lhe tirasteis, um para ti, outro para o vosso filho Constantino, deitasteis um ao mar para o consagrarem, pra com eles venceres todas as guerras e batalhas, e nos declarar esta verdade

Reza-se uma salve Rainha à Rainha das verdades; padre-nosso as santo mais velho que houver em Roma

Entre meia hora, há-de de nos declarar esta verdade: ou pelos cães a ladrar ou pela porta a abrir e a fechar, ou pela gente a passar ou crianças a chorar, ou sinos a tocar.

Saint Helen, queen of the Sene moura² you were, to Christendom you returned, with eleven thousand virgins you meet, with them you greeted, three twigs of green parsley you cut, with the cross of Christ you dreamt, three nails it had three nails you took, one for you, another for your son Constantine, another you threw in the sea to consecrate it, so with it you could win every war and battle and declare us this truth.

Pray a Salve Regina to the Queen of Truths; an Our Father to the oldest Saint in Rome.

Within half an hour, you shall declare to us this truth; whether by dogs barking or doors opening or closing, or by people passing or children crying, or bells ringing.

While still requiring a random event as an answer, this prayer either includes or implies the very language meant to be used in a very simple yes-or-no type of answer. The flexibility and complexity of response have been lost, but a simple and direct unambiguity has been gained. Upon analysis, the prayer itself is also seen to refer to St Helen, the most common supernatural entity addressed in this form of divination, and furthermore includes a mention of the 'Queen

of Truths', a similar concept to the 'Lady of Truth' mentioned in the previous procedure from Porto.

Following this same system of response and overall motif but to the exclusion of a random tangible event is the following prayer, also collected by Vasconcelos (1880a: 542–543) in Cumieira (district of Vila Real), which is an event of a divination procedure fully following the structure presented in Figure 1b:

Santa Helena,
Rainha de Sena,
Moirá fostes,
Christo vos tornastes,
Co'a c'roa de Christo sonhastes,
Ao caminho vos botastes,
Co'as três Marias cos encontrastes,
Com ellas pão e peixe creastes,
Tres cravos lhe tiraste,
Um deitastes ao mar p'ra ser sagrado,
Outro com elle ficastes,
Outro deste a vosso irmão Constantino
P'ra vencer a batalha da fé.
Peço-vos, Santa Helena, Se for verdade isto que vos eu peço
[pergunta]
Se fôr verdade, sonhos me dareis,
Agoas claras,
Roupas lavadas,
Campos verdes;
Se fôr o contrario do que peço,
Sonhos me dareis;
Campos seccos,
Roupas sujós
Agoas turvas.

*Saint Helen,
Queen of the Sene,
Moura you were,
[To] Christ you turned,
With the crown of Christ you dreamt,
To the road you took,
With the three Maries you met,
Bread and fish you created with them,
Three nails you took,*

*One to cast into the sea to consecrate it
Another you kept,
Another you gave your brother Constantine
To win the battle of faith.
I ask you Saint Helen,
If it is true this that I ask
[question]
If it is true dreams you will give me [of],
Clear waters,
Clean clothes
Green fields;
If it is the contrary of what I ask
Dreams you will give me [of]
Dry fields,
Dirty clothes
Murky waters*

While the language of the answer is still supplied in the same basic terms, the answer is now asked to be given in the performer's dreams. Particularly relevant for this point is the information which Vasconcelos offers that this procedure in particular is intended to be performed at midnight, meaning that it is likely that this prayer is meant to be performed before sleep (this beyond the conception of midnight as an hour of magical significance, being a liminal moment).

Moving beyond saints, the same kind of procedures can also be performed with recourse to the stars, while not straying from the general structure. As collected by Vasconcelos in Lagoa (district of Faro) (1980b: 288):

<i>Estrela meiga e luzente,</i>	<i>Gentle and shining star</i>
<i>Que brilhas no firmamente,</i>	<i>Who shines in the firmament,</i>
<i>Diz-me, por favor:</i>	<i>Tell me, please:</i>
<i>[pergunta]</i>	<i>[question]</i>
<i>Se assim for, faz o milagre</i>	<i>If this is such, make the miracle</i>
<i>E dá-me os seguintes sinais:</i>	<i>And give me the following signs:</i>
<i>Cães a ladrar, portas a bater</i>	<i>Dogs barking, doors closing</i>
<i>E meninos a chorar.</i>	<i>And boys crying</i>

Beyond purely divinatory procedures, while following the same communication model and overall establishment of language and significance between the performer and an addressed supernatural entity, are some rare forms of love and manipulation sorcery. The following, collected once again by Vasconcelos (1985: 40) at an undisclosed location, is a particularly rare example due to its

structure and the complex relationship it seems to create with its addressed spirits:

[NN] onde estás tu e onde estou eu? Nem tu me vês a mim, nem eu te vajo a ti; eu tenho parati o que tu não tens para mim; três mensageiros, todos eles muito fortes – Lucas, Luzes e Elias. Lá tos mando, lá tos envio, para que façam no teu coração tamanha revolução e tamanho amor por mim que não possas comer nem beber, nem dormir, nem descansar, sem comigo vires falar. Lucas, Luzes e Elias, se assim for, sinais me haveis de dar: cães a ladrar, portas a abrir e a fechar, sinos a tocar e meninos a chorar, enquanto eu rezo nove salve-rainhas por vossa intenção.

[NN] *where are you and where am I? Neither do you see me nor do I see you; I have for you what you don't have for me; three messengers, all of them strong – Lucas, Luzes and Elias. There I send them to you, so as they may do in your heart such a revolution and such a love for me that you won't be able to eat, nor drink, nor sleep, nor rest, if you do not speak to me. Lucas, Luzes Elias, if this is such, signs you should give me: dogs barking, doors opening and closing, bells ringing and boys crying, while I pray nine Salve Reginas in your name.*

Analyzing the general functioning of this particular sorcery, it does not in actual fact stray from many forms of love sorcery meant to torture its intended target into submission. However, beyond the objective of the sorcery itself, an extra layer of communication is established. The mentioned spirits are asked to confirm whether the operation was successful by the same yes-or-no type of communication we have observed so far. To establish this as a completely commercial type of interaction, payment is also offered in the form of nine Salve Reginas. This particular point opens a few other problematic issues with this sorcery, also due to the fact that the particular trinity of spirits addressed (Lucas, Luzes and Elias) seem to very rarely feature in any other folk magical procedure.

Breaking these three names down, Lucas and Elias seem to be biblical names (Luke and Elijah), while Luzes (translatable as 'Lights') is likely a corruption or fill-in for Lucifer. Obviously, there may not be a particular inner logic to the selection of these three names, as a large component in them is likely their alliteration, which is likely to be a more important magical component than the actual characters being addressed. Nonetheless, given their presence in a love/manipulation sorcery, they are likely to be easily fitted into the category of evil spirits. However, the payment offered for this particular service does not correspond with that most commonly given to this class of spirits in Portuguese folk magic, as prayers are much more commonly offered as payment to the souls

of the dead or the souls in Purgatory. While a full description and breakdown of this sorcery is not what is intended here, it should be noted as one of the most interesting and complex I have ever found in Portuguese folkloric records.

Moving forward, the last of these procedures worthy of note, still in the realm of love and manipulation, comes from the same 1731 Inquisition process of the first prayer presented. Comparing it with the previous ones, a more complete ritual context and procedure is presented:

Estando no tempo em que a fazia com o pé esquerdo descalço, e braço e perna da mesma arte nus, e o cabelo da parte esquerda desgrenhado, com a janela e porta aberta, e um prato com sal diante de si; Tomando uma mão cheia de sal:

Esta mão cheia venho deitar
Por [NN]
Para que sem tino andar,
Sem tino andar, sem tino andar,
Me venha buscar,
Me venha falar;
Que venha
E não se detenha
Para Satanaz
Para Barrabaz
Para Caifaz!
E logo, logo me venha amar,
E estes signaes me hão de dar:
Canes a ladrar,
Bestas a passar,
Gatos a saltar/gallos a cantar.

Being at this time with her left foot bare, and the arm and leg of the same side naked, and her hair on the left side uncombed, with her window and door open and with a plate of salt in front of her. Taking a hand full of salt:

*This hand I cast
For [NN]
So as he will have no sense,
Have no sense, have no sense,
And come get me,
And come talk to me;
And come
And not be detained
For Satanaz*

*For Barrabaz
For Caifaz
And immediately, come and love me,
And these signs you shall give me;
Dogs barking
Beasts passing
Cats pouncing / Roosters singing.*

While obviously similar to the previous case – which is an excellent indicator of how this particular type of engagement with spirits is widespread – the three spirits addressed here (translatable as Satan, Barabbas and Caiaphas) are likely the most common trinity addressed in Portuguese love/domination magic. Also noteworthy is the ritual procedure itself, whose purpose seems to be to place the performers in a liminary state between dressed and undressed.

CONCLUSION

After analysing the prayers and sorceries set out above and returning to our initial points of discussion, from the cognitive studies point of view, it can be considered that, in these cases, the process typically described for the attribution of agency and causality in a religious environment is reduced to extremely personal and individual circumstances. Divination is really not about ascribing order to the world on a cosmic level, but rather the restructuring of the world and its invisible active agencies in a functional capacity to do with personal questions, circumstances and communication with a supernatural agency. The randomness of the universe is momentarily suspended and rearranged to provide a single individual or a group with an answer.

One other issue which can be brought up by these prayers when fitted to the cognitive model is that, at its core, it is not the attribution of an invisible supernatural agency to a random event that is concerned, but rather, offering an invisible supernatural agency a means of manifestation through a random event; the meaning of a random event is first determined, after which it is offered as a means of manifestation for a supernatural agency. Essentially, rather than agency being ascribed, a means of controlling agency is presented.

From a western esotericism perspective, the model for spirit communication transmitted by these prayers also conveys the underlying point that, in this context, spirits are taken to be autonomous and radically independent and exterior to humans; they do not manifest through an adequate learned use of the human mind but by their own ‘virtue’ (occasionally dependent on invitation). In striking contrast to the process of ‘absorption’ used by modern

and contemporary occult practitioners, one may then come to call this process one of ‘alienation’ and this particular model for spirit communication as the ‘tangible contact model’.

Finally, these prayers and processes also offer us a very tangible data about the accepted methods and capacity for spirits to interact with the mundane material world in the particular traditional folk environment referred to. From here we can extrapolate to the kind of material objects that spirits interact with and the kind of realms of human experience they can provide answers on. In sum, these prayers, and similar divination techniques, within their own contexts, mark the accepted place of spirits in the mundane or material world and the kind of power that they have (or are allowed to have) over this same materiality.

Furthermore, analysing the specific yes-or-no language cues which many of these prayers offer spirits for their manifestation, the interesting observation can be made that these are often the same kind of this-world manifestations which are frequently listed in some charms for spirit, disease or bad weather banishing, such as those referring to a place where no cat meows, no dog barks or no rooster crows. Borrowing Jonathan Roper’s definition (2003: 25), the use of these cues for spirit banishing can be understood as the construction and description of an anti-world where spirits/diseases/bad weather are expected to travel to. If this is the case, the prayers and sorceries described in this paper, given the use of similar cues, can also be understood as inviting spirits into concrete this-world manifestation by offering them the very mundane events which determine this-world as a concrete space of human proximity. Consequently, such banishments can perhaps also be understood not so much as banishing spirits to a faraway place or an anti-world, but to a state/place of non-manifestation or communicative silence.

NOTES

¹ ANTT, Inquisição de Lisboa, proc. 4082. Digitalization of the original documentation can be consulted at:
<http://digitalq.arquivos.pt/details?id=2304053>

² ‘Moura’ is a complicated concept in Portuguese (and Iberian) folk environments. In this particular case it is mostly used as a synonym to non-Christian.

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