ABSTRACT

In Senegal and Gambia, the main reason for divinatory consultation is seen not in misfortune or uncertainty but in the client’s intention, longing and desire (nganiyo). To locate this intention is the diviner’s first task. Successfully executed, it is the proof of his/her divinatory capacities. Drawing on the phenomenological and semantic analysis of Senegambian divinatory praxis, especially among Mandinka speakers, it is argued that Senegambian divination should not be seen as an abstract search for knowledge but as a performative praxis constituting an intentional and empowering cultural space that allows the subject to engage actively with his current situation. In a parallel analysis, it is shown that the notions and concepts underlying the divinatory process form in themselves a highly instructive theory of intentionality and affliction.

Introduction

The importance that is attributed to divinatory consultation in Senegal and Gambia is so wide-reaching that hardly a sphere of life is exempted from it. Issues of health, fertility, conjugal and financial well-being, professional and electoral success, business and sport performances, the outcome of examinations, job applications, as well as travel and migration are often felt to necessitate the consultation of a divination specialist. In the languages of the region, persons specializing in the autochthonous and/or Islamic arts of divination and healing are commonly referred to in the same terms of respect as those used for a person renowned for religious education and learning in the Islamic literary tradition. It is these titles of respect, like mooroo in Mandinka, serigne in Wolof or thierno in Pulaar, that are commonly translated into French and English as ‘marabout’. In order to explain the central importance to most people in Senegalese society of private maraboutic services (outside strict religious or ethnic affiliations and public ceremonies), this article looks...
at these ritual specialists not just as political and economic actors but as the cause, location and mediators of highly performative and generative hermeneutic processes and ritual action. This emphasis on the generative and performative dimensions of maraboutic consultation requires a change in perspective, away from the person of the marabout/diviner and his abilities as center of the divinatory process, towards an analysis of the experience and existential involvement of the person who seeks out divinatory consultation.

Apart from being explicitly subject-oriented, this article’s approach is internal and semantic, aimed at disclosing the qualities of Senegambian divinatory praxis from inside its own structure and terminology, as well as phenomenological and hermeneutical in trying to analyze different aspects of the divinatory process in relation to the subjective and cultural experience generated by the divinatory encounter. This is meant to avoid the treatment of divination as a kind of cultural artefact that can be described by the researcher as if existing apart from the hermeneutical situation and existential concern of the individuals involved in it. Instead, following a hermeneutical tradition of understanding rather than explanation that reaches from Dilthey to Heidegger and Gadamer, the analysis of Senegambian divinatory praxis as intentional space aims at an understanding of the existential significance that divination unfolds for the persons involved, not just as a search for knowledge but as a source of transformation, empowerment and hope.

Divinatory techniques and the structure of the divinatory encounter

Senegalese and Gambian diviners employ a wide range of divinatory techniques. One of the most common forms uses cowrie shells (kurungo in Mandinka, petaw in Wolof), which are cast onto the floor or mat where one is sitting. After every cast, the diviner examines the position formed by the shells for meaningful patterns that will guide his assessment of the consulter’s situation. Another widespread form of divination is geomancy, or ramalu as it is called in Mandinka, a complex technique implying elaborate calculations and the mastering of an extensive interpretative repertoire. Yet another type of divination that I witnessed entailed the use of a small mat (basoo) made of thin sticks, equipped with red cotton threads and a number of amulets (safee). Folded once in the middle and held motionless between the thumb and index finger of the right hand, the diviner asks series of questions potentially relevant for his client. Despite his attempt to keep his hand motionless, with certain questions the mat will involuntarily start to move and...
open up, indicating a positive answer to the question posed or the possibility that what the consulter is looking for will realize itself. While there are many more varieties used by Senegambian diviners, including the casting of roots (suluufayo) or groundnut shells (tiyafatofayo), divination by the use of a string of prayer beads (tasabayo la jubeeroo), dream divination (listikaroo) and forms of ‘direct’ voyance, each form with its own logic and technical requirements, the question arises of what all these different methods have in common. What is divination in the Senegambian context and what does it bring about?

By focusing on the process of the divinatory encounter rather than on the outward methodological or material differences of the various techniques in use, it can be shown that the development of divinatory consultations in the Senegambian context is characterized by a common structure consisting of several consecutive steps. The client enters the room in which the diviner receives his customers and, after a brief exchange of greetings, the consultation is opened by the pronunciation of the nganiyo, the client’s intention, longing, question or concern. The client who approaches a diviner with a specific problem or wish normally never inquires directly about these issues. Instead, upon being prompted by the diviner, the client pronounces his question or concern silently onto the objects the diviner will use during the procedure. Thereupon, it is the task of the diviner to identify the issues at the core of the client’s concern by means of divinatory procedure. This identifying or locating of the client’s nganiyo represents the first and main emic criterion of the success of a consultation. Will the diviner talk about the things that really concern me? Will he see what I am looking for? Will he really see me in the patterns of the cowrie shells, the geomantic signs, his dreams? The (silent) pronunciation of his or her intention or concern by the client is followed by the execution of the divinatory procedure. This second part of the consultation, the actual act of divination itself, is referred to as jubeero in Mandinka and set in Wolof, literally an act of looking at or viewing; a process of investigation and interpretation that should not be understood as if limited to visual perception but which entails an encompassing consideration of the client’s condition through both, the divinatory signs appearing in the shells, the geomantic patterns or dreams, as well as through the diviner’s insight into the client’s economic, social and existential situation. At this stage of the divinatory process, depending upon the method employed, different but intersecting metaphors and terminologies come into play. They contribute to the construction of a specific ritual environment, relate the divinatory encounter to other sociocultural fields
and structure the emerging divinatory pronouncements, all of which brings about a complex process of ‘poiesis’, poetic ‘world-making’ (De Boeck & Devisch 1994), and dialogue that sets the divinatory space apart from other, non-divinatory cultural scenes. The third phase of the consultation (which, in practice, often falls together with the second phase, the divinatory enunciation) concerns the pronunciation and recommendation of the ritual remedies required, primarily in the form of offerings that range from sugar cubes and candles to cloth or food. These offerings are referred to as sadaa in Mandinka or sarax in Wolof, terms derived from the Arabic sadaqa, designating voluntary alms that in Islamic thought and praxis are seen in contrast to the obligatory alms of zakat. The fourth and final phase of the divinatory process entails the execution of these ritual recommendations by the ‘taking out’ of sadaa (sadaa bondi), the distribution of the prescribed objects among individuals or a group of people who have either been indicated by the diviner or chosen by the client himself. Each of these phases of the divinatory process bears specific qualities that together provide for a praxis that affects the individual on several fundamental phenomenological levels. In this article, however, following the sequential structure of the divinatory encounter, I will concentrate exclusively on the first moment or gesture of the divinatory process: the articulation and subsequent locating of the nganiyo, the one gesture that opens up the divinatory space and draws the subject into its hermeneutic dynamics.

Drawing on the analysis of the semantic meaning and the phenomenological implications of this and other key divinatory terms, I will argue that, already with this first ritual gesture, divination shows itself not as an abstract search for knowledge but as an encompassing and highly performative cultural praxis with specific phenomenological qualities and cultural consequences. I will further argue that, with the articulation of the nganiyo, Senegambian divination becomes immediately performative by opening up what I call an ‘intentional space’—a performative cultural space for articulating and dealing with personal intentions and desires that not only reflects the intentional nature of the human being but responds to, negotiates and transforms the subject’s intentional position by allowing him to engage actively with his longings and afflictions in a changing and challenging contemporary world.
Nganiyo, yeene, niyya: Semantic meaning and phenomenological implications of divinatory terminology

In Senegalese and Gambian cultural settings, divinatory consultation starts with the silent utterance of the *nganiyo*, the subject’s inaudible pronunciation of his or her central reason for coming to the consultation. In many cases, the diviner will not explicitly ask the client to pronounce the *nganiyo* but will simply give him or her some of the cowrie shells to be used in the subsequent casting procedures, or the pen for drawing and calculating the geomantic patterns. As the client is generally already acquainted with the normal proceedings of a divinatory consultation, he will take the cowries or the pen to his lips without a word and silently pronounce the reason for his coming for consultation. While the client concentrates on this, the diviner, in anticipation of the beginning of the session, will study his writing tools, rearrange his set of shells or other instrument, or change into a more comfortable sitting position, allowing the client to concentrate without having the impression of being observed or listened to. Because in most cases the client is not asked explicitly to pronounce the *nganiyo*, because of the seemingly casual behaviour of the diviner, and because of the inaudibility of the client’s words, this particular phase of the process is easily overlooked by the outside observer. During the course of research, however, I have come to consider this moment as one of the most crucial single clues to the understanding of what is at stake in the divinatory encounter, what divination in the Senegambian context actually is and what it achieves.

The term *nganiyo* is most commonly translated by Francophone Mandinka speakers as *l’intention* (intention) or, less frequently, as *desire* (desire). The Mandinka term is derived from the Arabic *niyya*, a term that is also, in the same way as the notion of *nganiyo*, most commonly translated as intention, intent, will or direction of will (see e.g. Wehr 1980: 1013). Intention in the form of *niyya* plays, for instance, a crucial role in the Islamic doctrines and practice of obligatory prayer (Ar. *salaat*). These doctrines hold that a prayer that is spoken without the articulation of the *niyya*, one’s proper intention to fulfil the obligations of *salaat*, is invalid. In the context of Senegambian maraboutic divination the term takes on a more general meaning and can refer to what one wants to do, obtain or pursue, or, simply, to what the consulter wants to know. Sometimes, instead of *nganiyo*, another term, *hajoo*, is used when giving the cowrie shells or another divinatory instrument to the client. This term, however, also derived from Arabic (*haajja*), is not normally synonymous with *nganiyo*. In daily speech, *hajoo* does not translate
as intention or desire but refers to an issue or undertaking that needs to be dealt with by the individual. But why can these terms be used alternatively when employed at this crucial beginning of the divinatory encounter?

When I inquired about the seemingly synonymous use of these two terms, nganiyo and hajoo, most diviners insisted that, while hajoo could be used, the correct technical term was nganiyo. However, both terms are used because the affair that preoccupies someone is finally what causes that person’s intention. The intention, in turn, reflects the person’s affair and is directed to its solution. Almost apodictically, one of the diviners that I worked with stated, ‘your affair is your intention!’ (ila hajoo wolum ila nganiyo leti). What such a statement points to is that nganiyo and hajoo are not only used synonymously but that they are, in a certain sense, actually the same. In referring to the intentional situation of the consulting individual from different, somehow interdependent directions, one might say that hajoo and nganiyo appear to be positioned in a relationship of dialectical rather than direct synonymy in that the dimensions of both terms extend and reaffirm, rather than substitute for, each other. What, then, is the cultural sense and logic of divination if it characterizes itself through its own terminology as dealing with a person’s intention and if the first task of the diviner is conceived of as locating his client’s intention? How should divinatory praxis be understood if it presents itself as responding to the nganiyo of the client or, more broadly formulated, as a response to the consulter’s specific intentionality?

Intentionality is generally regarded as one of the central concepts of phenomenological theory (Bernet, Kern & Marbach 1996: 85-96). Husserl, in Logische Untersuchungen (1975 & 1984 [1900 & 1901]) and later in Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie (1976 [1913]), emphasized that acts of consciousness (Bewußtseinsakte) are never without content, but always include something that is intended by and within the act. An act of perception, for instance, never takes place in the abstract, but is necessarily perception of something. The object of a perceiving act can, therefore, not be separated from the act itself but is always part of that consciousness of which it is the object. It therefore becomes clear that if every single act of consciousness can be characterized as intentional, human consciousness in general is defined and structured by intentionality. How can this characterization of consciousness as intentional help us to understand the significance of divination in the Senegambian context?
Despite the semantic link between the concept of nganiyo and the phenomenological notion of intentionality, it is clear that the nganiyo of the consulter in the divinatory encounter cannot be directly equated with intention in the Husserlian sense. In Husserl’s perspective, intention is the main characteristic of intentionality as a structure that underlies all action and consciousness. As a structure it is in itself abstract, an a priori characteristic of consciousness that can only be deduced from the normal phenomenal reality in an operation of what Husserl called an ‘eidetic reduction’, a kind of stripping of the phenomenon’s concrete but incidental properties to its bare essentials. Nganiyo, is, instead, not abstract but always already concretized by the specific hopes, questions and predicaments of the subject. The significance of the phenomenological notion of intentionality for the understanding of the concept of nganiyo thus does not lie in an exact identity between the concepts, but in the fact that both notions seem to entail parallel insights into the nature of human consciousness and action. The Husserlian notion of intentionality allows us to recognize that the cogito is never self-sufficient but always intentionally related to its lifeworld. Divination seems to know this. By directing itself to the intention of the client, divination shows that it is aware that the person who takes recourse to it is not interested in abstract knowledge but primarily in what concerns her or his personal situation. The interest of the divinatory search lies not in obtaining neutral information but in bringing out something of what is most relevant and urgent for the consulter. In this sense, divination can only be meaningful in so far as it responds to the issues the consulter is really concerned with.

At this point it is useful to come back to the observation of the synonymous usage of the terms hajoo (affair, concern, issue, etc.) and nganiyo (intention, intent, desire) at the beginning of the divinatory encounter. What can be said about this relation of dialectical synonymity between hajoo and nganiyo if looked at from a Husserlian perspective?

In *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie*, Husserl introduced the terminological distinction between noesis (from the Greek *noēn* to think) and noema (what is thought) to emphasize the fact that the distinction between intending act and intended object is not meant to portray something like a subject-object relationship in the physical world but to describe the intentional structure of consciousness itself (Husserl 1976 [1930]: esp. 200-224). What is crucial here is that the intentional act (*noesis*) and the intentional object (*noema*) are not experientially present as two separate entities. Rather, the intentional lived experience itself always
comprises both noesis and noema at the same time. Extrapolating between Husserl’s phenomenological reflections and the question of the significance of the articulation of the ngamiyo or hajoo at the beginning of the divinatory encounter, the phenomenological implications of this first moment come into view. In so far as an intentional act as noesis necessarily comprises a noematic correlate, one could say that the articulation of the ngamiyo by the consulter as an intentional act always necessarily entails an issue (hajoo) that noematically corresponds to the subject’s intention. This has a number of consequences, which, I believe, are fundamental to understand the full scope of this first moment of the divinatory encounter.

What are these consequences? First, the consulter is not simply an addressee of divinatory discourse. From the beginning, he or she is fully implied in the process as an intentional human being with specific concerns and hopes. This does not mean that the client has to actively participate in the divining process by a parallel interpretation of the divinatory signs (for which he normally lacks the necessary knowledge and experience) or to enter into dialogue with the diviner (although the divinatory encounter will often lead to dialogue). Full implication here means phenomenologically implied in the sense that what most characterizes the person when coming for consultation, that is, the wish and the urge to learn something about his/her personal predicament, is fully recognized not only by the diviner but by the structure of the divinatory encounter itself. At the moment that the client receives the divinatory objects in order to pronounce his or her intention, he cannot remain in the position of a neutral observer (unless attempting to distance himself from the whole event). Instead, the client is forced to become aware that it is his or her personal and often secret concerns that form the central object of the divinatory inquiry. Consequently, through the articulation of the ngamiyo, the subject is forced to open up to the inquiry. Simultaneously, he also undergoes a change in the way the inquiry relates to his own situation. One could say that it is already at this very early stage that the situation of the client becomes inevitably (at least potentially) transformed: his or her most intimate secret (kungloo) is suddenly put under the scrutiny of divinatory procedure. We can see that this transformation works noetically as well as noematically in so far as the new intentional situation entails an attitudinal change within the intending act towards alertness, curiosity, expectation, responsiveness and so on, which is not abstract but defined by the object of its intention, its specific hajoo, its concern, desire or
whatever takes the position of the Husserlian noema. Through the articulation of a concrete intentional issue, the necessary presence of the noematic correlate in the intentional act forces the subject to open up and become responsive to his or her own motivations and motives, as well as to the responses and findings pronounced during the divinatory encounter. From the perspective of the divinatory process, one could say that the moment of the articulation of the nganiyo becomes phenomenologically transformative in so far as it actively brings the subject into a consultative situation that can no longer be approached neutrally. Rather, the subject has to confront his or her own intentions and is forced to open up towards the different ritual and discursive dimensions that will unfold in the further course of the divinatory encounter. The analysis of the notion of the articulation of the nganiyo thus indicates that the significance of divination cannot be fully understood if the divinatory encounter is considered only in the light of its predictions and final outcome of these predictions in the subject’s future. Instead, the analysis shows that the divinatory encounter, independent of its ultimate outcome, becomes immediately transformative in (re-)shaping and (re-)orienting the subject’s intentional situatedness.

Strictly speaking, the interpretation of the gesture of the articulation of intention at the beginning of the divinatory encounter as an expression of intentionality does not depend upon the explicit use of a term such as nganiyo. The intentional dimension is pre- or extra-terminological in that it is already present in the gesture itself. However, the existence of a technical term within the divinatory terminology that identifies this inaugural intentional act gives additional weight to the analysis. It shows that the analysis of divination as intentional space not only discloses the logic of the divinatory encounter according to its outward sequential structure but that this understanding of Senegambian divination as related to intentionality is predated by the understanding of the divination process in its own terminological conceptualizations. In this sense, intention and intentionality are present both implicitly, in the gesture of the articulation of a specific intention or wish by the consulter as a prerequisite of the divinatory process, and explicitly in the concept of nganiyo that is referred to and acted upon by the diviner and his clients. The validity and pervasiveness of the intentional logic of the divinatory encounter is also reflected in the fact that it is not limited to a single ethnic or linguistic context. Wolof-speaking diviners, for instance, refer to the same situation with the term yeene which also appears to be derived from the Arabic niyya and is employed in
the same way as the Mandinka notion of nganiyo. Divinatory terminology and its use and understanding by divination specialists thus moves beyond the implicit dimensions of meaning in habitual praxis and represents an explicit attempt to give words to the complexities of divinatory praxis and experience. In this regard, one could say that the specific use and systematics of the terminology not only presents us with ‘ethno-phenomenological’ notions from which one can derive an emic model of the understanding of divination but it also formulates the beginnings of a phenomenology of divination that looks beyond the confines of what Husserl called the ‘natural attitude’, i.e. moving beyond the non- or pre-theoretical position in which we normally act and think and towards a way of thinking that attempts to reflect on the insights and assumptions underlying its own implicit logic.

Summarizing the above, I would argue that the pronunciation of the nganiyo by the client is not just an opening gesture but a decisive structural moment of the divinatory process, creating the opening of an immediately performative divinatory space with specific phenomenological qualities. Seen as such, the notion of nganiyo is presented as perhaps the most important single clue to the understanding of Senegambian divinatory praxis. The danger of attributing such an importance to one single notion within an epistemic, ritual and discursive praxis that contains a multiplicity of different elements lies in constructing a coherence that perhaps does not exist in the observed praxis itself. Consequently, it should be asked how the notion of nganiyo relates to the other elements making up the divinatory praxis, its logic, terminology and its further unfolding. How far is this notion present in the rest of the divinatory process, apart from being the conceptual basis of the gesture that opens the divinatory encounter? How far can this notion be shown as underlying the more general logic of the divinatory praxis? More specifically, one could ask where exactly does divination locate the intention, desire and ambition of the subject that seem to form the central object of its inquiry? Where is it that the nganiyo originates? In order to answer these questions, I will look at the relation between the notion of nganiyo, a number of geomantic categories, and a variety of concepts and understandings of the motivational grounds of divinatory consultation that could be understood as the place or condition from which the nganiyo originates.
Ramalu: Introducing Islamic geomancy

Islamic geomancy, or (in Mandinka) ramalu, is a widespread form of divination in Senegal, Gambia and Islamic sub-Saharan Africa in general. Even beyond the boundaries of this area, it seems to have inspired and influenced divinatory traditions in many regions that came in contact with but did not necessarily embrace Islamic religion or culture as a whole (see Brenner 2000 for a discussion of this aspect with reference to the literature on various traditions, and van Binsbergen 1996 for the relation between Islamic geomancy and four-tablet divination in South Africa). Overall, Islamic geomancy represents a divinatory technique that seems to have adapted well to local circumstances and requirements (Brenner 2000, Kassibo 1992). Because of its remarkable geographical expansion, and probably because of the intellectual appeal of its formal and cultural complexity, Islamic geomancy is arguably one of the forms of divination that has received most attention from anthropologists, especially if one includes derived forms such as sikidy and Ifa that feature prominently in the ethnography of divination in Madagascar, Nigeria, Togo and Benin (for Senegal and Mali see, e.g., Kassibo 1992, Sow 2001, and Eglash 1997; for sikidy see, e.g., Vérin & Rajaonarimanana 1991 [with further references]; for Ifa and related forms see e.g. Trautmann 1939, Bascom 1969 & 1980, Abimbola 1976 & 1977, de Surgy 1981, Akinnaso 1995).7

The Mandinka term ramalu is derived from the Arabic darb ar-raml, or khatt ar-raml, the beating or writing of the sand, names echoing the fact that these techniques were originally executed on a surface of sand, a material basis that most marabouts today replace with writing paper on which they work with a felt or ballpoint pen. However, some diviners still use a sand surface and it is because of this original material basis that this form of divination (as well as its European and African derivatives) is referred to as geomancy in western historiography and anthropology. The technique consists in the drawing of sixteen random lines of stripes or dots from which the diviner then derives a series of geomantic patterns or signs (tamansee) with divinatory meanings. The diviner usually starts by writing the client’s name and surname (sometimes accompanied by the name of his or her mother, father or both) in Arabic script on top of the sheet of paper used for the drawings and calculations. Further down the page, the diviner then writes the name of the Prophet Mohamed in Arabic letters (mim, ha’, mim, dal), and it is above these four letters that the sixteen random lines are drawn, one after the other, from right to left, forming four clusters of lines, each containing four single lines (see Illustration 1).
Illustration 1: Example of a geomantic calculation executed by Bamba Camara, Thiès, Senegal, July 2003.
From these sixteen lines, the diviner then derives the first four geomantic signs to appear on the lower half of the layout by ticking off, from bottom to top, the pairs of dots or stripes of each line until either one single pair or a single dot or stripe is left. The dots or pairs of dots that remain after this procedure are then transferred underneath the name of the Prophet Mohamed that divides the sheet in half. Corresponding to the four different clusters of lines on the upper half, this procedure of ticking off the remaining pairs or single dots and transferring them to the lower half of the calculation will result into four geomantic signs (1-4). From these four signs another group of four is derived by adding up the different elements of the four signs horizontally according to a simple calculation based upon the distinction between even and odd results: two single dots or two pairs making a new pair, a single dot plus a pair resulting in another single dot (4-8). The next four signs are derived in the same way by combining the first and the second, the third and the fourth, the fifth and the sixth, and the seventh and the eighth sign (9-12). The 13th and the 14th sign are derived from the combination of the 9th and the 10th and the 11th and the 12th respectively. The 15th sign results from the combination of the 13th and the 14th. Completing the calculation, the 16th and last sign of the layout is formed by combining the 15th and the first. The result of these operations is a geomantic layout of sixteen signs, most of which refer to certain prophetic figures of the (Abrahamitic-) Islamic tradition (Yousuf, Ayuba, Mousa, etc.), each of which has distinct divinatory connotations.9

At this stage, it is crucial for the understanding of geomantic divination to note that the divinatory connotations of the sixteen signs making up a complete layout are not fixed but dependent on the position in which they appear. It is important to realize that what the diviner does is not just a process of deriving a set of signs but an operation of filling up of a system of sixteen positions referred to as ‘doors’ in Mandinka (bungdaal) or ‘houses’ in Arabic (sing. bêt, pl. bayyät), each of which possesses, like the signs themselves, specific divinatory connotations. In other words, the geomantic layout is constructed in two dimensions: first, a fixed grid of sixteen ‘doors’ or ‘houses’, each associated with a specific region of meaning (the person, wealth, health, kinship relations and so on); second, a set of sixteen geomantic signs associated with certain houses but which in the application of the procedure may appear in any of the sixteen slots and must be interpreted accordingly. This structure is represented clearly in the following table made by Bamba Camara, a young Mandinka marabout (mooroo) based in Thiés, and one of the four
geomantic specialists I had the chance to work with. The table shows all sixteen signs each of which, for the sake of convenience, is numbered at its bottom. The Arabic name of the sign is written on top; underneath, also in Arabic, one finds the name of the ‘door’ or ‘house’. All signs are arranged in the order of the houses with which they are normally associated.

Illustration 2: Table showing the signs and houses of the geomantic system written by Bamba Camara, Thiès, Senegal, July 2003.
Transcribed and translated, the table reads as follows. The first two columns contain the transcription of the Arabic designations of the different signs and houses. The third column gives an English translation of the names of the houses. The fourth column gives the Mandinka equivalents of the Arabic names that Bamba Camara mentioned in his oral explanations but which he did not include in the above table. The fifth column gives a translation of the Mandinka terms. The additions in square brackets contain variations in the Arabic designation of the different Houses and Mandinka equivalents which were not mentioned by Bamba Camara. All additions stem from a similar table and corresponding explanations by Yafay Mané, Medina Souane, Casamance, January/February 2004.

Table 1: The geomantic signs and their houses (Transcription and translation of Illustration 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Sign</th>
<th>Name of Houses (Arabic)</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Doors (Mandinka)</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yusuf</td>
<td>Beit an-Nafs</td>
<td>House of the Self</td>
<td>Sondumoo Bundaa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Adamu</td>
<td>Beit al-Mal</td>
<td>House of Property</td>
<td>Naafuul Bundaa/ (Harjee Bundaa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Muhamadu Al-Mahdi</td>
<td>Beit al-Aba'</td>
<td>House of Fathers</td>
<td>Faalaa Bundaa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Idris</td>
<td>Beit Khara</td>
<td>House of Brothers</td>
<td>Faading Bundaa/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ibrahim</td>
<td>Beit Banin</td>
<td>House of Sons/ Descendants</td>
<td>Dingo Bundaa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>'Isa</td>
<td>Beit Marid</td>
<td>House of the Ill</td>
<td>Jankaroo Bundaa/ (Kurusango Bungo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Umar</td>
<td>Beit Nikah</td>
<td>House of Marriage</td>
<td>Futa Bundaa/ (Futaneco Bundaa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ayub</td>
<td>Beit Qubur/ Beit al-Maut</td>
<td>House of Graves/ House of Death</td>
<td>[Kabuuru Bungo]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 1 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Houses Sign</th>
<th>Translation Doors</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allahu</td>
<td>Beit Safir/ [Beit at-Tariq]</td>
<td>Taamoo Banda/ [Taanoo Siloo]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sulaiman</td>
<td>Beit Sultan/ Beit al-Maluk</td>
<td>Mansa Banda/ Mansayaa Bungu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Ali</td>
<td>Beit Raja'i</td>
<td>Jikoo Banda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nah</td>
<td>Beit 'Adu</td>
<td>Jawoo Banda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yunus</td>
<td>Beit Majalis</td>
<td>Sidulaa Banda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hassan wa al-Hussein</td>
<td>Beit Mas'al</td>
<td>Nyningkaroo Banda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Uthman</td>
<td>Beit Qudsi/ Beit Hukm</td>
<td>Kiiti Banda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musa</td>
<td>Beit 'Aqabatu</td>
<td>Luhang Banda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While each of the different geomantic signs is thus conventionally associated with a specific door within the layout, in an actual consultation signs appear in different houses, because of the random procedure explained before. As each sign can appear in any of the sixteen houses, and as the meaning of a specific sign is dependent on the position in which it appears, the geomantic system provides for a high degree of variation and flexibility. The number of possible layouts depends upon the first four signs that are generated from the random lines of dots, drawn at the beginning of each session. Thus, the geomantic procedure first combines a first sign out of sixteen with another set of sixteen ($16^2$), and repeats this a third ($16^3$) and a fourth time ($16^4$ multiplied by 16), arriving at a total of 65,536 possible layouts (Jaulin 1957: 44-46). Even if we look at each door-sign combination separately rather than contextualized by a complete layout, we find 256 possible combinations. 'Ramalu', Bamba Camara pointed out to me during our cooperation,
‘is an extensive knowledge’ (ramalu londoo fanuta le), the study of which continues throughout the course of the diviner’s career.

In order to get a better idea of the nature of these proceedings, as well as of the concrete issues involved in geomantic consultations, it is instructive to look at how the different signs and their positions are interpreted by the diviner in an actual consultation.

Reading the signs of ramalu: Toward a case-based understanding of geomantic procedure

The layout reproduced above as an example of geomantic sheets (see illustration 1) was executed by Bamba Camara at the request of a 23-year-old woman of Wolof background. After she pronounced her reasons for seeking the consultation silently upon the pen to be used for the geomantic procedure, Camara spent a few minutes working silently on the paper in front of him, writing, drawing the clusters of random lines, deriving the geomantic signs and studying them. Then, he started to explain his findings, drawing upon a detailed and systematic analysis of the signs appearing in the different houses of the geomantic layout.

According to his reading, she had experienced difficulties either within her present marriage or in relation to an intended marriage, which, because of these difficulties, had never taken place. According to Bamba Camara, this interpretation of her current situation was indicated by the sign of Nuh (Noah) ‘standing’ (be looring) in the House of the Self (beit an-nafs), the house that is normally (with the system at rest), associated with the sign of Yusuf (see table 3). The appearance of Nuh, who, in geomancy, is generally associated with enmity and opposition, in the first house of the system suggested that her plans and undertakings had been affected by the opposition or bad intentions of others, probably her own parents and relatives. This situation was further evaluated by Bamba Camara through consideration of the significance of the constellation in the second position, Hassan wa Hussein standing in the House of Chance or Wealth (beit al-mal), indicating a state of ambivalence, the urge to move elsewhere or the loss of valuables. Furthermore, the sign of Yusuf in the House of Marriage (beit an-nikah), indicated that the client had been desiring a certain person for a long time, while Camara perceived the sign of Idrisa in the House of Hope as pointing to the realization of her hopes in the near future. This outcome was, according to his later explanations, indicated not so much by the meaning of the sign of Idrisa but by the fact that this sign consists of seven points.
According to another interpretative principle attributing different temporal values to the geomantic signs depending on how many points they had, out of a maximum of eight, this means that the affair was not just a matter of the past but had already started to be realized in the present. The sign of Hassan wa Hussein in the House of Wealth also indicated that for safeguarding her chance she should distribute two chicken of the same weight as sadaa (or sarax in Wolof), the offering considered to be the most important ritual means to influence the development of one’s personal affairs. Besides the two chickens, Camara added, another sadaa of six meters of cloth (of any color) or two meters of black cloth were indicated by the geomantic signs. A day after the consultation, Camara explained to me that there were further details that had been revealed but that he had not wanted to address during the session in order not to embarrass his client unnecessarily. At a certain place in the geomantic layout, her ‘virginity’ had appeared and, by means of another combination of signs outside the basic sixteen doors, he had seen that ‘she knew’, meaning that she was no longer a virgin although she seemed not to be married.

In terms of method, this short example of a geomantic reading shows geomantic divination as a complex process of interpretation, in which the different signs in the layout are not interpreted stereotypically or in an isolated manner but according to the houses in which they appear and in relation to the other signs. Beyond the interpretation of the different signs in terms of their conventional divinatory connotations, and their appearance and association with the different ‘Doors’ or ‘Houses’ of the geomantic system, signs can be associated with male or female persons, the different elements (water, air, etc.), and different times (past, future and present). All this not only illustrates the complexity of the process but also points to the diviner’s high command of the interpretative catalogue that is necessary for a comprehensive reading of a geomantic layout. However, it is important to remember that, although fascinating to both practitioners and clients, the most important aspect of the consultation is not the complexity of the process but the degree to which the diviner is able to locate his client’s reason for seeking out divination: that is, to identify his intention (nganiyo) or concern (hajoo), and his ability to address the issues that are central to the client’s situation. The extent to which Camara succeeded in locating and addressing his client’s concern was striking. When I asked the client immediately after the session, in Camara’s absence, why she had come for divination, she explained that she had wanted to marry but that her parents had withheld their approval because her friend belonged
to the caste of blacksmiths (Wolof tëgg) while she was geer, a non-artisan not belonging to any specific caste. Despite the impossibility of their marriage because of the rules of endogamy governing caste relations in Wolof society,¹¹ she had become pregnant and subsequently given birth to a boy who was now two years old. According to her understanding, Camara had referred precisely to these issues in his reading of the geomantic signs. He had seen that others had interfered with her plans (indicated by the sign of Nuh in the first house of the geomantic system) and he had also seen that she had desired someone for a long time (indicated by the sign of Yusuf in the house of marriage).

The effect of such a divinatory enunciation on the client is not difficult to grasp. Having one’s intentions, longings and personal predicament recognized so comprehensively proves the diviner’s capacity and ensures that the reading of the geomantic layout as a whole is experienced as true and meaningful, thus encompassing not only the diviner’s immediate analysis of the subject’s condition but also the other two main elements of the enunciation: the predictions made (Camara had seen not only the difficulty of her situation but also that it had already started to improve), and the recommended ritual remedies (the distribution of cloth as sarax that would allow her to overcome her difficulties and to realize her marriage plans). But how can the effect and significance of the divination in the present case be described in more general and theoretical terms?

Confirming the abstract analysis of the phenomenological implications of the conceptualization of the process by Senegambian diviners as reaction and answer to the subject’s initial pronunciation of ‘intention’ (nganiyo), I would argue that the present case clearly shows that the divinatory inquiry’s meaningfulness depends primarily upon its ability to relate directly to the individual’s situation. In a successful consultation, the diviner is able to identify the client’s reason for coming to the consultation, silently pronounced upon the pen used for the calculation and drawing of the geomantic signs, or whatever instrument is used in the specific case. If this general understanding of the divinatory process is correct and if the notion of nganiyo is really central to the understanding of the divinatory process, the question remains, however, how this locating and responding to the client’s intentional concern is achieved. How exactly does the divinatory procedure conceptualize this process of identifying the subject’s intention? How does the concept of nganiyo relate to the larger logic of the geomantic system with its complex interplay between houses and signs, its multifold
interpretative options? Where exactly in the geomantic layout is it that
the subject’s intention can be located and where does it originate?

Heart, self, mind, and person: Geomantic categories and the location of nganiyo

The following excerpt forms the basis for the analysis of the location
and origin of the subject’s intention in divinatory praxis. It is taken
from a longer interview with Bamba Camara who had agreed to teach
me some of the basics of ramalu, which, in 2003, he had been studying
for more than ten years, first under the auspices of his father and then
by himself, through reading, discussion with other marabouts, and, most
importantly, through his own practice. He had shown me how to derive
the ‘houses’ (Ar. bayuut) or ‘doors’ (bungdaal) from the random divinatory
patterns that have to be drawn at the beginning of every ramalu ses-
sion. Sitting in front of a sheet of paper that by now was covered with
the characteristic dotted lines on its top half and a series of geomantic
patterns at its bottom, the two halves separated by the name of the
Prophet Mohamed written in Arabic script (Illustration 1), I asked him
where he would start to talk to his client? With which sign would he
begin? What would he say?

Excerpt 1: Explanations of ramalu procedure by Bamba Camara, Thiès, Senegal,
July 2003

Saaying dung, i yaa long ramalu,
siolo le be a a siyaata.
Kuwool fanang be jee le iye meng long
janni i be kuma-wo-kuma folo,
i naata jee jubela le,
ofo i yaa long,
moo meng naata
mune be a sondomoo to.
Kon, foloo-foloo,
siolo fanang be jee le,
iye meng long, ning,
iye woo junbee, ning,
iye wulo komposi
wo kaa yitandi,
iye le ko
fiing, de a naata mune la,
mune mu a hamee kuwo ti.
( ...)
Excerpt 1 (cont).

Dool be jee i si naa,  
i taa fola,  
Iye fo dung,  
ala problemoo mu mung ti,  
a taa fola.  
Wo ka naa le a saa fo iye a jubee nñe,  
He comes and says regard me [i.e. divine for me].  
Yaa long wo siifaa mk  
i taa noola i yaa ñininkaa.  
Si nom, a baa fola  
nte lafita le  
ye kuwool jubee.  
Ita maa long,  
[But] You don’t know,  
c’est inconnu.  
Nte ye meng noo wo le mu rek,  
ngaa jubee sillood,  
bungdaal be jee  
nka menuu composed  
puuru [pour] ka long ñîng  
au fônd  
mune yaa batandi,  
aye niitooroo,  
ala niitooroo be looring mune to?  
Nsi wo fanang jubee,  
n saa jee,  
ñîng de  
a la niitooroo be looring ñîng ne to.  
his niitooroo is standing on this.

Bamba Camara’s explanations were instructive, indeed, at that stage of my research, they were groundbreaking in that he seemed to touch upon fundamental notions that until then I had only guessed at. In order to appreciate the full scope of his explanations, one should keep several things in mind. First, the questions that are most urgent for the ethnographer are regularly not those that are most urgent for his informants. A situation that is symptomatic for much of the ambivalence of the anthropological project of searching for meaning where other people are mainly concerned with managing their lives from day to day with little or no financial resources but nevertheless enmeshed in a dense net of necessities and demands. Second, when asked about their work, the explanations that were offered by many of the specialists I
worked with focused almost exclusively on the description of the mechanics of the different forms of divination they use. For many diviners there seemed to be no meta-level to their work, no ‘ethnotheory’ on divination. What the diviner needs to know is how it works: how to draw the divinatory patterns in ramaulu and how to read them; how to throw the cowrie shells and interpret their positions; what verses to speak before attempting listikaroo or how to count the beads of a chaplet (tasabayo) in order to find the right passages in the Qur’anic text. Effective divination, in other words, does not necessitate any specific theoretical knowledge of why divination works, what particular terms ‘really’ mean, or why certain things have to be done in a particular way. For effective divination, correct execution of the typical action pattern suffices. This is mainly because the different forms of divination are not conceived of as philosophical or metaphysical models but as practical diagnostic tools to understand a person’s situation, to evaluate the possible development of someone’s affairs, and to identify the necessary ritual remedies. Although he is well aware of the technical intricacies of his trade, Bamba Camara’s explanations seemed to reach further than the mere description of divinatory method and procedure. Contrasting with the focus of most diviners on the technical specifics of the method, his explanations seemed to contain a more theoretical dimension resulting, on the one hand, from his own study of geomancy and, on the other, from his many years of study of the key works of the Islamic tradition ranging from the Qur’an, Hadith and Sunna to the wide field of Islamic thought and commentary.

In the first paragraph of the excerpt above, for example, rather than simply stating how to read the geomantic chart, Camara refers to the necessity of finding out, through divinatory procedure, ‘what is in the heart’ (mune be a sondonoo to) of the person that comes for consultation. In the third paragraph, Camara again adds a new dimension to his explanations by identifying the general nature of what pushes people to seek divinatory consultation as ‘what has tired’ a person (mune yaa batandi) or, more concisely, as niitooroo, a term that generally refers to feelings of sadness, sorrow, grief or distress (see, for example, WEC 1991 [1989]: 239). As a compound noun, however, niitooroo links the word niyo, soul, and tooroo, wounding, which stems from ka toora, to injure or to wound, both physically and emotionally. Niitooroo could thus be translated not just as sadness but, more literally (and more dramatically), as ‘soul-injury’ or ‘wounded soul’.

Initially, it seems justified to assume sadness or some kind of affliction as marking the condition of someone seeking divinatory consultation, especially if the heart (sondomoo) is considered the origin of what pushes
the client towards the consultation. But does this description of the client’s condition not contrast with the insistence by most diviners on the centrality of the client’s ‘intention’ (nganiyo)? Is there not a certain contradiction, if, on the one hand, the subject is considered as a consciously intending individual, implying volition, self-reflexivity and autonomy, and if, on the other hand, he is seen as afflicted and distressed, implying a more passive condition of suffering and pain? In my opinion, rather than contradicting itself, by insisting upon an intrinsic link between niitooroo and nganiyo, between the subject’s affliction and his intention, the signifying chain of heart (sANDOMOO), mind (HAKILOO), intention (NGANIYO), need (Hajo) and affliction (niitooroo) conveys a deep sense of the nature of intention, desire and the general predicament of the subject. This becomes clearer if we look in more detail at how these different notions are related in the geomantic system.

In Arabic, the first house that is derived from the lines drawn above the name of the Prophet on the top half of the page is called ‘the House of the Self’, Bā‘it an-nafs. It was this position in the geomantic layout that Camara referred to as the place in the ramalu where you have to look first. In Mandinka, for the same position, two terms are used synonymously: moo la bungdaa and sondomoo la bungdaa, ‘Door of the Person’ and ‘Door of the Heart’. In Arabic-Islamic thought, nafs is conceived of as one of three components that make up the non-material reality or being of the human person: nafs, ‘aql and ruh. Nafs, usually translated as the ‘self’ of the person, is the locus and origin of human drives, self-interest, emotions. ‘Aql instead designates the faculty of reason; it is the locus of mind, cognition, rationality and ethics, and seen in opposition to the nafs. In Arabic-Islamic thought, it is this opposition between nafs and ‘aql that marks the human being. In Sufism especially, the person’s spiritual life is often perceived as a struggle between these two principles. Ruh, the third component of this triad of consciousness, is commonly translated as ‘soul’, the entity that leaves the body at night when the person is dreaming and that survives when the person’s physical existence ends in death. What does it mean, then, if in the translation of the Arabic-Islamic system of geomancy into Mandinka ritual praxis, the ‘House of the Self’ becomes ‘the Door of the Heart’? Or, more specifically, what does this semantic shift from nafs/self to ‘heart’ or ‘person’ mean in terms of the relation between nganiyo and niitooroo?

On the one hand, one might think that, by replacing the notion of self with the notion of person or heart, the resulting Mandinka model simply ignores the distinctions between self, mind/reason and soul that are characteristic of Arabic-Islamic thought. In that case, one could
only regard the models as almost unrelated, as somehow having been separated in the act of translation from one symbolic/signifying system into another. On the other hand, one could pursue the idea that the Mandinka notion of the heart is actually synonymous with the Arabic-Islamic notion of self/nafs, but using a more body-related idiom, while the Arabic-Islamic notion could be perceived as more abstract. In my opinion, there is little real evidence for assuming that the Mandinka system has separated itself from the Arabic-Islamic geomantic model. Neither Bamba Camara nor any of the other specialists with whom I worked expressed ideas in this direction. At the same time, they were very aware of the different terms that should be employed in speaking about the geomantic system depending upon the language one uses. While speaking about geomancy, nafs (self) is translated as sondomoo (heart), but this is not reversible. A Mandinka diviner would never use the Arabic term for heart (qalb) to translate the Mandinka notion of the heart (sondomoo) back into the Arabic system. In my view, this, together with the fact that Mandinka (and Wolof) diviners perceive themselves as practising not a different type of geomancy but the original Arabic-Islamic form in their own native language, clearly indicates that the relation between the Arabic and the Mandinka model of geomancy should be considered as a relation of continuity rather than of separation. But how exactly should we understand the synonymous usage of nafs and heart/person if we perceive this semantic shift as occurring within the internal logic of geomantic divination rather than as breaking away from it? And why do we have two terms that can be used in Mandinka to replace the original Arabic notion of nafs? The crucial point here is probably that translation rarely works in exact one-to-one linearity but entails a search for equivalence. Translation, then, is a coming-nearer, not an identical replacement. It could be argued, therefore, that the Mandinka model translates the notion of nafs from two directions simultaneously: first, from the inside or core of the self/nafs, that is, the heart (sondomoo) as the locus of emotion, volition, desire and so on; second, from the outside, that is, as the person (moo) who comes for divinatory consultation. According to such a view, it could be argued that nafs contains a double dimension that is correctly captured in the Mandinka translation. The person present in the divinatory encounter as nafs (self) is the person (moo) but not as actor or neutral consulter but in full subjective presence, as bearer of emotions, afflictions, desires and hopes, all of which can be (symbolically) located in the heart (sondomoo).

How does this relate to the analysis of the notion of nganiyo and the
significance of the concept of intentionality for the understanding of Senegambian divinatory praxis in general? What can we learn from these terminological details about the understanding of intentionality and desire that is implicit in Mandinka divinatory praxis? According to Bamba Camara and other diviners, to locate the nganiyo of the consultant is the first and most difficult task of the diviner. The place where this intention can be localized is the first door or house of the geomantic system, the Door of the Heart (sandomoo bunda) or Door of the Person (moo la bunda) whereby both ‘heart’ and ‘person’ are understood as being equivalent to the Arabic notion of the ‘self’ (nafs). In this sense, intention is grounded in the heart, the most intimate and the most open dimension of the subject. Against cognitivist or rationalist assumptions, the geomantic system insists that ‘the person thinks with his heart’ (moo ye miirro ning a sandomoo). Consequently, when I asked Bamba Camara what he meant by the word ‘heart’ he replied, ‘the mind is the heart’ (hakiloo wo le mu sondomoo ti). But would this equation of mind and heart not be in contradiction to the opposition between nafs and ‘aql, self and mind/reason, in Arabic-Islamic thought?

At this point, it is crucial to realize that geomancy as praxis is not bound to extra-ritual, conventional conceptualizations. Rather, it gains its coherence through its own internal, practical logic. In such a perspective, one could argue that Camara’s statement ‘the mind is the heart’ is not contradictory but actually reveals a radicalization of the conventional (and in this form perhaps over-simplified) Arabic-Islamic view of the human being as a bearer of reason but hampered by drives and emotions. In geomancy, and in Senegambian divination in general, this conventional relation between self and mind, nafs and ‘aql, sandomoo and hakiloo, almost seems to be reversed. As long as the person is subjecting him/herself to divinatory consultation, s/he is not considered as primarily governed by reason but is first and foremost considered in relation to his/her heart (sandomoo). One could say that here the emotive dimension is not seen as a secondary or even negative side of the human being but is actually understood as what makes the person. This conceptualization of the category of the heart as being of greater importance for the understanding of the condition of the person than the category of the mind is also reflected in the following explanations by Kabiru Faty, the son of my host in the Casamance, who, despite being only in his late twenties, enjoyed great respect in his community for his knowledge of Arabic and the key religious texts, as well as for his maturity. His explanations are reproduced in full not only because they largely confirm on a more general level what has
been said about the role of the notion of the heart in Mandinka geomancy, but also because they touch upon a number of aspects that will be relevant for the later sections of this analysis.

Excerpt 2: Explanations on the notion of the heart (sondomoo) by Kabiru Faty, Casamance, Senegal, February 2004.

Sondomoo, 
wo le adamadingo, 
moo ka meng miraa, 
moo la miroo buka futa jee. 

I damma le ka miraa. 
A munta sondomoo, 
doo be jee moo sa fo iye 
ite ka mune miira. 

Meng be i hakiloo to ngaa long ne. 
*Par exemple* walla nikuyaa 
ing a laata hakiloo kang dorong 
a se funti i fiaa to. 

Bari sondomoo ka meng miira, 
moo taa buka futa wo to. 

I damma se si noo le i ye tara kowo to. 
I saa fo iye i ka mune miira? 

I saa fo iye hani, 
nka kuu doo le miira. 
I saa fo iye dukarree 
i ka meng miira, 
a foo. 

I ko iye nka ñing ne miira, 
a yaa tara wo nteeng . . . 

Hakiloo ning sondomoo wolu lom. 
Ning sondomoo be meng kang, 
wo le janfata. 

Sondomoo la le miiroo ka janfata. 

Sondomoo le ka i miira, 
a ye i miira a ye kuwo muneen be miira a to. 

Ning a ye i miira a to dorong; 
mbe ñing ne kela teng ne, 
mbe dung na jang ne. 

Walla ndindinma kaari ye

The heart, 
that is the human being [lit. Adam's child], 
[that] what the person thinks, 
[another] person's thought can not reach there. 

Only you can think about it. 

That means, the heart, 
sometimes people say to you, 
‘What are you thinking about?’ 

That what is in your mind, I know it.’ 

For example, anger 
if it is only [situated] in your mind, 
it shows in your eyes. 

But that what the heart thinks, 
nobody can reach there. 

Only you can be in that affair. 

They ask you, what are you thinking about? 

You tell them, no, 
I think about something else. 

They may ask you, please, 
that what you are thinking about, 
tell it. 

You tell them, I think about this, 
although that is not what it is . . . 

These are the mind and the heart. 

That what the heart is concerned with, 
it is far away (i.e. located deeper within the person), 

The thought of the heart is further away 
(i.e. more profound than that of the mind). 

It is the heart that makes you think, 
it is what makes you think about the contours of every affair. 

It makes you think about that, 
I will do that, 
I will enter [get involved in it] here. 

Or, in my childhood
Kabiru Faty’s explanations touch upon different aspects of the meaning of the heart in Mandinka conceptualizations of the nature of the human being, from the heart as a form or location of thought, to the question of how far what a person has in his heart can be perceived by others, to the importance of the heart as a privileged means of perception in religious contemplation. In several of these instances, the heart (sondomoo) is described in opposition to the faculty of the mind (hakiloo). Faty refers, for instance, to the fact that anger felt in the heart remains undetectable by others (implying its greater profundity), while anger located in the mind will show in a person’s eyes. More generally, he states that ‘the thought of the heart is more encompassing [than the mind]’ (bari sondomoo la miroo ka wara) and that ‘the mind does not go far’ (hakiloo la taa buka janfa). This characterization of the heart as transcending the mind in terms of its epistemic qualities clearly reflects
the same valorization of the heart as a major constituent of human being that allows Mandinka diviners to translate the Arabic notion of the ‘House of the Self’ (beit an-nafs) not only as ‘Door of the Heart’ (sondonoo bunda) but also, more comprehensively, as the ‘Door of the Person’ (moo bunda). At the same time, however, one might ask whether Kabiru Faty’s privilegization of the notion of sondonoo (heart) does not contradict Bamba Camara’s somehow different statement that ‘the mind is the heart’ (hakilo le mu sondonoo)? The crucial point here is that also in Kabiru Faty’s explanations, despite his different appreciation of heart and mind in terms of their epistemic quality, both notions are understood as faculties or modalities of ‘thought’ (miiroo). In this sense, rather than being conceived of as opposed principles, both notions, sondonoo and hakilo, are recognized as essential components of perception, occupying different places in a continuum of the faculty of consciousness. It thus becomes clear why Francophone Mandinka speakers translate nganiyo sometimes as intention and sometimes as desire. While in European languages the term ‘intention’ may have acquired a more cognitive connotation (associated with the mind) and ‘desire’ (associated with the heart) is perceived as part of the emotive, the notion of nganiyo underlying the logic of divinatory praxis seems to entail both dimensions, the emotional and the cognitive, without the necessity of further dissection.

Niitoooro and the origin of nganiyo

So far I have analysed the relation between the notions of sondonoo (heart), hakilo (mind/reason) and nganiyo (intention/desire). What has stayed out of sight is the relation between the subject’s intention (nganiyo) and what Bamba Camara called niitoooro, the ‘soul-injury’. While the heart/mind is seen as the bearer of the subject’s intention/desire (nganiyo), in the third paragraph of his explanations Bamba Camara points out that the condition of the heart/mind that gives rise to the individual’s intention is always one of niitoooro—sorrow, grief, affliction—and that it is this condition that he has to come to know and to understand through the further consideration of the geomantic layout. Not mentioned in the excerpt is how exactly the substance of what makes the niitoooro of the individual consulter in a specific case can be identified. Bamba Camara did, however, explain this point at a later stage of our lessons.
According to Bamba Camara, ‘what has wounded the person’ (mune yaa tooraa), that is, the niitooroo upon which the person’s intention seems to rest, can be identified by combining the first and the eighth house or door of the geomantic layout, the Door of the Heart or Person (sondomoo or moo la bundaa) and the Door of Death (sayaa bundaa). What does this point to?

In the same way as the notion of the heart (sondomoo) as location of the subject’s intention/desire (nganiyo) indicated a non- or extra-rationalist understanding of intentionality, the relating of the Door of the Heart/Person with the Door of Death as the combination revealing the niitooroo of the person, points, in my view, to an understanding of the individual’s condition and predicament that emphasizes the existential and emotive over the cognitive dimensions of human existence. In emphasizing the relatedness of intention/desire (nganiyo), death (sayaa) and affliction (niitooroo), the geomantic logic seems to reveal a fundamental aspect of the condition of the human being in general, something that goes beyond the confines of the divinatory encounter. The idea that the intention of the subject who resorts to divination is fundamentally rooted in a condition of affliction indicates that niitooroo, rather than only designating an accidental and passing psychological state, also refers to a fundamental human condition or, in Heidegger’s terms, an existential of Dasein, a modality of being that characterizes the being-in-the-world of the individual subject in a much more encompassing sense.

In referring to the condition of an individual subject in a consultational situation, niitooroo is, however, not only referring to a general condition of subjectivity but, at the same time, is specific and concrete, in the
same way as the *nganiyo* of the person is, as I have argued above, never only an empty act of consciousness, but always already defined by its noematic correlate, the *hajoo* of the person, the issue at hand. But still, in a similar way as the notion of *nganiyo* and its employment in divinatory praxis seem to contain a fundamental insight into the relation between subjective intention and the self or ‘heart’ of the person, the notion of *niitooroo* seems to contain an insight into the relation of *nganiyo* as intentionality/desire and the experience of affliction or loss as a human condition that reaches far beyond the consultational encounter. In this regard, the notion of *niitooroo* almost seems to resonate with ideas like Hegel’s description of self-consciousness as emerging out of and being constituted through desire (Hegel 1988 [1807]: 120-127); the Lacanian notion of desire as rooted in the impossible attempt to retrieve what has been irretrievably lost; and Slavoj Žižek’s (Lacanian) reflections on desire as the subject’s attempt to recompensate itself in the realm of the Symbolic for ‘the loss of the immediate, pre-symbolic Real’ (Žižek 1999: 35). Following this resonance between geomancy on the one hand and Hegelian-Lacanian-Žižekian theorizing on subjectivity on the other, could one not argue that the idea of *nganiyo* (intention/desire) as being based in a specific and concrete condition of affliction (*niitooroo*) entails at the same time the idea of *niitooroo* as the foundation or prerequisite reason of subjectivity in general?

Although geomantic/divinatory praxis as such is not concerned with abstract theorizing about subjectivity but with providing a solution for the concrete situation of the person who comes for consultation, *niitooroo* does seem to possess exactly this double dimension of, on the one hand, a concrete condition of affliction related to a specific personal need or social conflict, and, on the other hand, a much more encompassing, existential condition that is neither necessarily referred to during consultation nor necessarily part of the subject’s conscious motivation/intention but is still to be considered, according to the logic of the geomantic system, as the intention’s real source. This double dimension can, perhaps, be better understood if we translate and conceive of *niitooroo* not only as sadness or affliction, but, more specifically, as trauma.

**Niitooroo as trauma**

Drawing on the Lacanian insight into the three orders structuring the processes of the human psyche (the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real), Slavoj Žižek has argued that what is most relevant about trauma in psychoanalytical terms is not the event itself but its underlying
structure. Traumatic experience represents, for Žižek, not only a specific personal psychological situation but the relation between the Symbolic Order that tries to symbolize and make meaning out of reality, and the Order (or, rather, the chaos) of the Real that predates and escapes it. What re-emerges in trauma, or what becomes causative in a traumatic experience in a deferred action, is not the content of the event but the event as part of the Real that escapes symbolization. Žižek exemplifies this by re-analyzing Freud’s famous case of the Wolf Man:

In the case of the Wolf Man (…) the cause, of course, was the traumatic scene of the parental coitus a tergo—this scene was the non-Symbolizable kernel around which all later successive Symbolization whirled. This cause, however, not only exerted its efficiency after a certain time lag; it literally became trauma—that is, cause—through delay: when the Wolf Man, at age two, witnessed the coitus a tergo, nothing traumatic marked this scene; the scene acquired traumatic features only in retrospect, with the later development of the child’s infantile sexual theories, when it became impossible to integrate the scene within the newly emerged horizon of narrativization-historization-symbolization. (Žižek 1994: 31; cited in: Myers 2003: 26-27)

But does this understanding of trauma fit the notion of niitooroo? Where in the condition of niitooroo could one identify the moment of conflict between the Symbolic and the Real?

The difficulty here lies first in the fact that, while the condition of niitooroo is referred to as the condition of the client that has to be understood in order to develop any further geomantic pronouncements, it is not necessarily referred to during the divination session itself. Instead, the client’s affliction might only be implicitly present in what the client intends or desires. In this case one might ask if there is a direct symmetry between the affliction/trauma and the articulated intention that would allow for the identification of the content of this affliction? This could be seen as problematic at least in so far as intention/desire, according to Lacanian theory, articulates itself in the Order of the Symbolic and the Imaginary and thereby covers rather than exposes its relatedness to the Real. Or, in more conventional Freudian parlance, the real cause of the person’s wish would remain invisible because it is repressed. At the same time, however, one could argue that in this situation it makes even more sense to translate niitooroo as trauma. The fact that niitooroo is normally not explicitly referred to in the divinatory encounter indicates that while the real conflict of the subject remains (or must remain) buried in the subject itself, geomancy is, despite (or maybe precisely because of) niitooroo’s apparent invisibility, aware of it as the unconscious source of the subject’s nganiyo, in the same way as
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Psychoanalysis is aware of the unconscious position of the trauma as the cause of neurosis.18

Leaving psychoanalysis aside, one could, however, also argue more pragmatically that, in so far as niitooroo is a metaphor rather than a theoretical notion, the adequateness of the translation of niitooroo as trauma does not rely on its exact coinciding with trauma as a psychoanalytical notion. What, in my opinion, is more relevant is that both notions, the niitooroo in divination and trauma in psychoanalysis, point at the fundamental rootedness of intention, desire and subjectivity in an experience of loss and affliction—an insight that is most dramatically reflected in the fact that, as we have seen above, in order to identify the ground and substance of the subject’s affliction, the geomantic logic requires consideration of the nganiyo (intention/desire) of the person in combination with the dimension of death (sayaa).

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that both terms, trauma and niitooroo, literally refer not exclusively to a person’s inner conditions but (as in its root form ka toora, to wound) to the experience of injuries and physical, bodily pain, and it is only in referring to these fundamental somatic modes of experience that these terms allow us to speak about the affictions of the subject in general. In this regard, the notion of trauma in psychoanalysis is as metaphorical as the notion of niitooroo in divination. Consequently, as trauma, niitooroo can be understood as both a real condition of affliction and as a central metaphor to reveal the deep hermeneutic and existential dimensions of divination as a cultural praxis that is not primarily a cognitive or epistemological operation but rather is concerned with the inevitable difficulties and conflicts of human existence.

In this regard, however, it is important to realize that the traumatic condition of niitooroo is not perceived to be the end. It is not only what has tired the subject (mune yaa batandi) but it is also what has caused the person to stand up (mune yaa wulindi).

Metaphors of uncertainty: Subjunctivity, intentionality and the existential significance of divinatory consultation

In different divinatory traditions, feelings of uncertainty and insecurity as a result of misfortune and affliction have been identified as one of the main reasons for divinatory consultation (Jackson 1978, Whyte 1997). By consulting a diviner, people want to learn what caused their problem and how it can be solved. By developing answers to these
questions, divination is perceived as helping people to make choices and alleviate uncertainty.

Not surprisingly, metaphors of uncertainty also play an important role in Senegambian divinatory discourse. One of the first positions that I was taught to recognize in cowrie-shell divination, for instance, consisted in a pair of shells lying side by side, pointing in opposite directions, one ‘closed’ or ‘lying on its belly’ (Wolof dafa dep), and the other one ‘open’ (Wolof ubeka).\(^{19}\) This position, I was told by Samba Nguer, a Wolof-speaking diviner in the Gambian urban agglomeration of Serekunda, just south of the capital Banjul, had many names.\(^{20}\) The designations that I noted were unrest (juxle), something unpleasant (nakhar), ‘two minds’ or ‘spirits’ (xel ñaar) (indicating hesitation), a disputing mind (xel bu werente), or, simply, ‘zigzag’ (sikisaka). Samba Nguer would point to where the shells had fallen into one of these frequently occurring positions, look at the client and tell her or him that the cowries showed that he was of two minds or feeling restless. In most cases, the person would simply nod or confirm by clicking his tongue. Sometimes, the client would add a piece of information, alluding to the issue at the bottom of this feeling, giving the diviner a hint about where to direct his inquiry next. ‘Zigzag’, ‘two minds’ and other metaphors of uncertainty thus play an important role in Senegambian divinatory discourse, both in describing the client’s condition and in allowing the diviner to show his understanding and empathy for the client’s situation. But, despite the central importance of these metaphors of uncertainty, the main reason for consultation is, as emphasized above, not seen in ‘uncertainty’ as such but in the client’s intention or desire (nganiyo).

In my opinion, the parallel existence of these two apparently supplementary rather than exclusive views of the client’s condition and motives indicates a conviction about what divination is, a conviction not only shared by diviner and client, but also reflected in the implicit logic of the divinatory systematic that I have tried to bring out. The afflicted subject who turns to divination in his/her search for a solution is not simply a passive or indifferent addressee of the divinatory pronouncements. Rather, by pursuing divinatory consultation, the client has already started to move from a more passive state of uncertainty into a more active way of dealing with the situation. In part, one could say, uncertainty and hesitance seem to be alleviated even before the session starts by the simple fact that consulting a diviner necessitates a decision by the client. If divination is seen as a way to alleviate feelings of uncertainty, how exactly does this happen? What does this transition
mean in terms of the phenomenological properties of the articulation of intention and the larger divinatory process?

Writing about the situated concern (her emphasis) of the subject in divination, healing and medicine among Nyole speakers in Eastern Uganda, Susan Reynolds Whyte argued that the mood in which cultural ways of dealing with and reacting to feelings and conditions of uncertainty are situated can best be grasped by applying the notion of subjunctivity (1997: 22-25, and 2002). First drawing on a dictionary definition of the notion of the subjunctive as ‘that mood of the verb which represents an attitude toward, or concern with the denoted action or state not as fact but as something either simply entertained in thought, contingent, possible (. . .) or emotionally viewed as a matter of doubt, desire, will, etc.’, she continues that subjunctivity can be conceived of ‘not just as a form of language and narratives, but as an attitude informing people’s responses to affliction’ (1997: 24). She also writes:

The approach to the study of misfortune in terms of pragmatism, possibility, and hope is a key to understanding the position and intentions of both healers as well as sufferers. . . . The emphasis on intentions, hopes, and doubts . . . has the virtue of attending to the actor’s situation. We are drawn to the practices of people positioned in the midst of the desires and difficulties of their actual lives. This is fundamental for a humanistic and open-ended anthropology. It allows the researcher and reader to experience the sense of resonance that allows understanding. It opens important questions about intentionality and fits well the concern of late-twentieth-century anthropology to recognize agency and the creative self. (Whyte 1997: 24-25, references omitted)

What is interesting in this statement for the further analysis of the notion of nganiyo is not just the programmatics (that to a large extent run parallel to the motives for the subject-oriented approach to divination that I have been pursuing throughout this text) but also the fact that, in the praxis of a culturally very different divinatory tradition, Whyte recognizes the same relatedness of misfortune, uncertainty and affliction on the one hand, and intentions, hopes and desires on the other, that are found in the semantics and praxis of Senegambian divination. This demonstrates, I believe, that the terminological and semantic properties of Senegambian divination are not only essential for understanding divination in this specific cultural context but they reveal important aspects of divinatory praxis in general. The question that remains, however, is to what degree the notion of subjunctivity can help us to understand the experiences underlying and resulting from the divinatory encounter. Does the notion of subjunctivity allow us to understand the exact nature of the link between affliction, uncertainty
and intention/desire in divinatory praxis? Or does it prove analytically effective only in so far as it brings the existence of this link more into focus? Ultimately, this may depend upon the possibility of grasping and defining the exact phenomenological properties of subjunctivity in the linguistic and practical modes of being-in-the-world reflected in divinatory praxis and semantics (an almost impossible task, I would add).

It seems interesting, however, that although the subjunctive relates to desire, intention and the expression of wishes, in French, Spanish and other languages possessing a subjunctive mood, the verb in the subjunctive is not the one in the main clause but the verb in the subordinate clause, that is, the verb describing the addressee or object of our intention, wish and so on. Does not this linguistic fact indicate that the subjunctive does not primarily express or evolve out of the subject’s intention (which appears in the indicative mood) but rather expresses the veil of uncertainty surrounding the object of that intention, as well as a certain positive margin of non-approval or non-occurrence granted to the object of intention? Translating this situation to the question of the role of the subjunctive in divination, I would argue that the notion of the subjunctive does not describe the totality of the motivational, psychological and existential situation of the subject in divination but rather describes its beginning and a part of its outcome, the initial state of uncertainty and the doubts remaining even after successful divination. In other words, I would argue that while the notion of the subjunctive may perhaps be used as a metaphor describing any state of uncertainty or affliction, it is more instructive to distinguish between the initial and final dimensions of subjunctivity in the divinatory encounter, and to consider the underlying reasons of divinatory consultation strictly according to the logic of the terminology underlying Senegambian divinatory praxis as being related to a condition of affliction (niitooroo) causing the subject to articulate his longings, wishes and hopes (nganiyo) in a way that represents an important move from a more subjunctive state of passivity (affliction) to a more indicative state of action (intention).

Summarizing and concluding the above, I would argue that in order to understand the multiplicity of motivational states underlying and resulting from the divinatory process, the ‘traumatic’ condition of niitooroo conceived of in Senegambian divination as the origin of the subject’s intentional concern, the expression of this concern conceived of as the subject’s intention, desire or longing (nganiyo), and the remaining uncertainty concerning the final development of the issues at stake should not be equated as such. The notion of subjunctivity does not fully
describe the nature of the intentional being of the subject in divination but may rather be understood as describing and characterizing a specific aspect of intentionality that is related to the intrinsic temporality of the intentional being-in-the-world that marks the subject in divinatory praxis and beyond. A specific prospective temporality that in divination results from the fact that what is sought in the divinatory search are solutions to problems of the past and present that have to be solved in a future that can never be predicted with absolute certainty. This final uncertainty is unavoidable and regularly acknowledged by both diviners and their clients. In requiring the articulation of the *nganiyo* at the beginning of the consultation, divination, however, bases itself on the decision-making capacity of the subject. And decisions are decisions of the here and now that must be situated in the realm of the indicative, contrasting with mere possibility. In requiring decision and responding to the subject’s decidedness, divination, thus, also relates to the indicative, turning the subjunctive of mere possibility, which could still be seen as a continuation of the original state of afflictive uncertainty, into real, future possibilities that wait to be realized by the use of the prescribed ritual remedies. The subjunctive, thus, rather than capturing the full divinatory experience, frames the situation of the subject, who, by the articulation of the *nganiyo*, starts to deal with his situation in a new way.

If Senegambian divination can thus be seen as a cultural praxis that necessitates and asks for the ‘decidedness’ of the subject in the form of ‘intention’ (*nganiyo*) to deal with the afflictive and subjunctive dimensions of life, it becomes also clear why most diviners insist that although *hajoo* (as the necessity or concern of the person) can be used at the beginning of the session for demanding that the person articulates why s/he has come, the technical divinatory term is *nganiyo*. This is because divination in the Senegambian context not only offers solutions for personal difficulties but also entails a claim towards the subject in so far as the consoler is supposed to move out of the passivity of mere hesitance and suffering by expressing him-or herself, to say what s/he wants and to act. In this sense, divination does not merely reflect the intentional being of the subject (which it also does). More important for the understanding of the performative properties of this praxis, the structure, discursive elements and ritual components of the divinatory encounter also construct and shape the intentionality of the subject in very specific ways. Seen in such a way, divination comes into view not only as a result of uncertainty or affliction but as an important cultural means to actively change the (subjective being-in-the) world through a healing of the self and through the empowerment of the afflicted.
Conclusion: Towards an existential anthropology of divination as hope and prospect

Rather than attempting to describe and analyze the whole of the divinatory encounter, I have concentrated on the question of the articulation and location of the ‘intention/desire’ (nganiyo) of the subject at the beginning of the divinatory process. This is the first of several elements that I consider to be crucial for both the working and the experience of the divinatory encounter.23 In concentrating on this first phase of the divinatory encounter, the scope of this article is deliberately limited. The focus on the notion of nganiyo, however, is, I believe, justified by the inaugural significance of the articulation of the nganiyo for the development of the divinatory process in its totality. As I have argued throughout this text, it is from this first moment that Senegambian divination unfolds and starts to provide a cultural space that allows the subject to articulate, develop and realize his or her own concrete and situated subjective intentional being-in-the-world. And at the same time, it is from this first decisive moment that divination starts to reveal itself as an expression of the ecstatic a priori temporality of the subject as one of the most fundamental aspects of human existence. It is in this double sense that the notion of ‘divination as intentional space’ should be understood. On the one hand as a possibility to approach ‘real’ (noematically defined and specific) intentional situations of longing, uncertainty, desire or suffering through a specific cultural praxis and, on the other hand, as a culturally institutionalized response to the prospective temporal being of the subject. It should be clear by now that against a conventional conception of ‘intention’ as a merely cognitive position or action that originates in the individual conceived of as an autonomous cogito, both the notion of nganiyo as well as the (Husserlian) notion of intentionality acquire their meaningfulness not only through the recognition of the subject as bearer of agency but equally through the recognition of the subject as being existentially tied into a concrete (inter)subjectively constituted sociocultural lifeworld. Understood in this sense, the concept of intentionality allows us to grasp the existential significance of divinatory consultation as a means of relating as well as an expression of the subject’s being related to the world. Moreover, in responding to the intentional subjective being of the person, divination offers a cultural space that allows and demands the subject to move from a more passive or waiting situation of suffering or longing towards an active approaching of his or her own afflictions and expectations. The formation and articulation of nganiyo at the beginning
of the divinatory encounter comes into view not only as volition but as a gathering and focusing of expectations and longing that in the pre-consultational situation were marked by ambivalence, uncertainty and hesitance. Offering an understanding of, as well as possible paths of action towards the healing of affliction and the realization of personal hopes and desires, Senegambian divination is characterised by a prospective dimension that allows the subject to develop a more positive sense of his or her personal future. It is this prospective and empowering dimension of divinatory praxis that shows the relation between the necessity of hope and the possibilities of divination. The further study of the prospective dimensions of divination should thus contribute to a better understanding of divinatory praxis as an encompassing cultural technology of hope, providing the promise of and the force for an alternative, ritual form of struggle for recognition, self-realization, and a prospectful future.

REFERENCES


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NOTES

1. The research on which this text is based consisted in a total of 18 months, carried out between February 2002 and March 2004. A preparatory phase of two months for intensive language training in Mandinka and logistic preparations (February to March 2002) was followed by a first period of familiarization and participatory fieldwork in a Mandinka village in the Middle Casamance (April to July 2002), some 400 km south of Dakar, widely known in the region as a traditional center of Islamic education since
its founding in the 1950s. The later periods of research combined extended stays in the same village with excursions in the Casamance region and the Gambia, as well as several stays in Thiès and Dakar in order to work with divination specialists in different rural, semi-urban, and urban contexts (December 2002 to August 2003, January to March 2004). During the research, especially during 2003 and February/March 2004, I worked with 16 diviners, studying different divination techniques and assisting at more than 60 consultations, always with the consent of both diviner and client. Instructions and consultations were tape-recorded, again with the consent of all parties. In most cases I was able to conduct post-consultational interviews with both diviner and clients. In this context, I thank Aziz Diatta (Thiès) for his assistance in translating from Mandinka and Wolof to French during many situations of tuition and interviewing, as well as for transcribing the Mandinka material that resulted from these research activities and translating it to French. I equally would like to thank all the specialists who discussed their work with me as well as all the clients who allowed me to be present during their consultations.

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2. In Senegal and Gambia, divination forms in many cases an integral and prerequisite part of the larger field of maraboutic consultation and ritual intervention. Despite the centrality of maraboutic services and divination in Senegambian everyday life, West Africanist scholarship has for the most part focused on the historical, political, and/or socioeconomic dimensions of maraboutism rather than on the in-depth analysis of maraboutic consultation, esoteric praxis and the meaning that these practices unfold both for the individual seeking consultation and for society as a whole. As a result, we are relatively well informed about the political and economic role of Islamic ritual specialists in Senegalese society, especially where maraboutism and religious life are manifested in one of the prominent and highly organized Islamic brotherhoods (see, e.g. the classic studies of Cruise O’Brien 1971 on the Mouride brotherhood and Villalón 1995 on the Tijaniyya) but we know relatively little about the personal and cultural experience that maraboutic consultation constitutes for the individual outside the more institution-bound and formalized marabout-disciple relationship.

3. If not otherwise specified, foreign words in the text are in Mandinka (Mand.), a variety of the Mande languages widespread throughout West Africa. Other foreign words are either in Wolof, which is spoken in and around Dakar, in most Senegalese cities, along the Gambian coast and along the major traffic routes, or (Classical) Arabic (Ar.), in which many of the ritual specialist achieve high levels of literacy.

4. The emphasis on the ‘viewing’, contemplating aspect of visual activity seems to contrast with the emphasis on the ‘seeing’ or perceiving quality of divinatory action in terms such as voyance or clairvoyance, derived from the Latin videre through the French voir, to see. One possible reason for this different semantic emphasis might be related to the question of who is conceived as the author of the divinatory pronouncements: the diviner, either in his/her own clairvoyant capacity or as a medium, or the divinatory apparatus itself, the shells, the writing on the sand, etc.

5. The pronunciation of the reason or motivation for the consultation seems, thus, to be directed not to the diviner but to the divinatory apparatus (or to the agents that might be considered to be ‘behind’ the clairvoyant potential of the divinatory proceeding).
6. The question remains if, with this distinction between *noesis* and *noema*, Husserl really succeeded in disentangling the experiential knot (see, for example, the critical remarks by Bernet in Bernet, Marbach & Kern 1996: 93 ff); for the purpose of the present analysis of divinatory praxis, however, it appears to me more constructive and useful to follow the epistemic direction that is implied in this terminological struggle in order to recognize and better understand the nature of the intrinsic link between the articulation of the *nganiyo* as intentional act and the issue at hand (*hajoo*).

7. Next to questions of historical development, distribution, and local adaptation, these studies have mainly focused on the interpretative catalogue and literary corpus upon which these divinatory traditions draw (Trautmann 1939, Bascom 1969 & 1980, Abimbola 1976 & 1977), its methodology and symbolism (Sow 2001), and the formal and/or mathematical properties of the geomantic system (Jaulin 1957 & 1966, Eglash 1997).

8. Note that Bamba Camara wrote the four letters making up the name of the Prophet Mohamed in isolated positions. This is an unusual but accepted way of proceeding. Most diviners, however, prefer to write the name in the normal, connected way, linking the different letters in the way that is typical for Arabic writing.

9. This basic procedure of deriving the geomantic signs has been described in the same way by Jaulin 1957, Eglash 1997, Brenner 2000 and Sow 2001.

10. Although the principles of interpretation applied by different geomantic specialists are largely identical, Bamba Camara’s way of presenting his findings to his client distinguished itself from other geomantic consultations that I witnessed by his regular and explicit reference to the names and signification of the different signs and doors of *ramalu*. Generally speaking, this explicit referring to the doors and signs and their divinatory meaning seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Other diviners often presented their results in a much briefer and more closed way, without any mention of the names of the signs or houses appearing in the consultation’s layout. The primary reason for this is that these details are considered of no importance for the client. Rather, the client is thought to be primarily interested in clear, unequivocal statements and ritual prescriptions. This more straightforward way of presentation shortcuts much of the symbolic tissue that otherwise could furnish the discursive space of the divinatory encounter such as the relation between, for instance, the situation of the client, the divinatory meaning of certain signs, and the vitae of the prophetic figures whose name they bear.


12. Literally, the ‘injury of the soul’. The term will be analysed more closely.

13. An opposition that is not even necessarily present, as it could be argued that *nafs* is etymologically related to *nafas*, breath or breathing (see Wehr 1980: 984-986), and could thus also be seen as having its origin in a somatic experience.

14. See supra.

15. Or to paraphrase Artaud: anthropology always entails the danger of artificially directing thoughts towards culture whose only concern is hunger (Artaud 1964: 9).

16. See, for instance, Werbner (2003, ch. 9) for an account of a much more complex use of the notion of *nafs* and the corresponding conceptualizations of the human self among members of the Naqshbandi Sufi brotherhood in Pakistan.

17. In the case of the young mother referred to above, for instance, the combination of the signs that had appeared in the Door of the Heart and the Door of Death resulted in the sign of *Adamu*, generally associated with the Door of Chance (*Hajoo Bundaa*) (see the single sign appearing on the outer left of the geomantic sheet reproduced above). According to Camara’s reading, this result showed that the Door of Chance was ‘the issue that had hurt her’ (*kuso meng yaa toora*). According to him, her chance was in obscurity (*diboo*), an issue that was then again linked with the issues of
marriage, love, and the interference of her family with her marriage plans that he had referred to before.

18. Concerning the possibility of parallel insights in psychoanalysis and divination it is also interesting to compare psychoanalysis’ insight into the importance of childhood development in the formation of the adult psyche with Kabiru Faty’s mentioning of childhood as one of the areas in which a person may have been hurt to a degree that the injury continues right into the present (see excerpt two).


20. Samba Nguer was the first to introduce me to cowrie-shell divination (*petawa*). As well as the many hours of tuition that he gave me, he alone made it possible for me to assist at more than 20 consultations.

21. In a simple French phrase such as ‘Je veux que tu fasse’ (*fasse*, from faire = to do) for instance, it is not the verb expressing the intentional attitude or action of the subject that appears in the subjunctive mood (‘je veux . . .’) but the verb describing the action of the subject of the subordinate clause, i.e. the subject that is actually the object of our intention (‘... que tu fasse’).

22. The time-relatedness of intentionality, and the fact that different modes of being play different and specific roles in relation to time, is an idea that has been expressed and explicated most clearly in Martin Heidegger’s epochal analysis of the relation of being and time. In a footnote that seems to be the only place in *Sein und Zeit* where he refers explicitly to Husserl’s notion of intentionality, Heidegger states that the intentionality of consciousness *grounds* (*gründet*) in the ‘ecstatic temporality of Dasein’ (Heidegger 1993 [1927]: 363) and promises to demonstrate this in a following section that, unfortunately, was never published. However, *Sein und Zeit* as a whole deals with the question in how far and in what way temporality characterizes and marks the being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) of existence as *Dasein*. In this sense, one could argue that *Sein und Zeit* as a whole does deal precisely with the question of the groundedness of intentionality in the temporality of human existence but replacing Husserl’s terms of intentionality with the notion of *Dasein*. In this regard, *Sein und Zeit* can be read as the attempt to show that ‘intentionality’ is not per se the most fundamental dimension of being. Instead, intentional being is in itself the result of the existential *In-sein*, *In-der-Welt-sein*, and *Sorge* of the subject (a term that Heidegger, for a number of reasons, prefers to avoid)—modes of being that can only be fully understood when grasped not as static but as embedded in time, and bearing specific modes of temporality. More specifically, Heidegger writes about the importance of Dasein as ‘a possibility of being’ (*Seinkönnen*) and temporality as the ontological sense of care or concernedness (*Sorge*) (Heidegger 1993 [1927]: 301-333). Somehow similar to the divinatory logic here described, (subjective) being is thus perceived by Heidegger primarily as possibility that must be dealt with in decidedness (*Entschlossenheit*).

23. As well as with other phenomenological dimensions of the divinatory encounter, for example the significance of the dialogic or the ritual insistence on intersubjectivity expressed in the remedial ritual praxis concluding the divinatory process, future work will also deal in more detail with the specific fields of concern tackled in the divinatory encounter such as, for instance, the wish for migration that often occurs in divinatory consultations in the Senegambian context.

24. For a first attempt in this direction, see Graw 2005.