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Signs, Marks, Oracles: 'Writing' in Lyela Fox Divination (Burkina Faso)

Luc Pecquet

Under *sùgwa* (fox) Father Nicolas (1953) stated in his Lyela glossary that a particular form of divination in Lyelaland (Burkina Faso) uses a fox as divining animal. No further evidence was advanced, and this statement has been overlooked, even though the Dogon widely practice a similar divination¹. Having borne Father Nicolas's remark in mind for a long time, I finally traveled to one of the two places where this divination is still practiced among the Lyela, a population of 100,000 people who dwell north of Koudougou in Burkina Faso and speak a language belonging to the Gur family.

Lyela divination with the fox very much resembles Dogon divination, since a diviner formulates oracles by interpreting the tracks left by a fox on a table drawn in the sand and marked with signs. However, the two sorts of divination differ graphically. Whereas the Dogon draw a limited number of summarily sketched signs over a composite of rectangles drawn in the sand, the Lyela draw signs arranged in a definite order and crowded next to each other. I would like to adopt a visual and material approach to present photographs of the tables drawn for Lyela divination². I was surprised by similarities between the information I had gathered in the field and what I read in texts about the concept of writing, ranging from the marks (the very basis of writing) originally used to the invention of writing itself. I shall briefly draw on the material gathered during fieldwork to describe the context of this divination and the drawing of these divinatory tables. I do not mean to argue whether Lyela divination is in fact writing.

Writing, divining

In Lyela divination, the drawing of signs next to each other, line by line, in the sand immediately makes us think of writing. To know whether and how this div-

¹ Although divination using fox tracks has become a distinctive trait of Dogon culture, years passed after the early reports from Griaule (1937) and Paulme (1937) before the next account was published (van Beek 2007). A few pages on Lyela fox divination can be found in Schott (1997).

² Several points mentioned herein have been developed in Pecquet 2007.

ination using fox tracks might be a form of writing, we would have to analyze the signs, their arrangement and interrelations.³ Herein, I shall at most suggest a few points to bear in mind. Though unable to ‘read’ the signs placed in this world, the Lyela ask the fox questions by using sand and words. Let us pursue this idea about using marks or signs to solicit the gods or ‘powers’. In his article devoted to the pieces of calabash bearing the Gurma diviner’s prescriptions for a client, Cartry (1963) stated that this was the only form of writing used among the Gurma (Burkina Faso). This system of signs reveals ‘a society that does not feel the need to set down [in writing] any language whatsoever, but only the language that it addresses to the gods’ (Cartry 1963:306). The final rite might disclose its purpose, when the piece of calabash with signs is broken and abandoned on the altar after a sacrifice. Cartry asks whether ‘the offering most suited for the gods might not be the signs themselves’⁴.

The materials and tools used in writing have often been studied. In Lyela divination, the medium is the earth, which is also the major supernatural power. The material actually used – sand – is never mentioned. For the whole process of divination, a word meaning ‘setting down earth’ is used. It evokes both the earth as the place where the table will be drawn and the Earth as a supernatural power; but people do not say outright that the oracle comes ‘from the Earth’⁵. Although drawing the signs on the ground is said to be ‘cultivating (the earth)’ (*vwàl*), a verb meaning ‘scarify’ (*byər*, which also refers to planting seeds in a line) is more often used. Both these words refer to the work done by the diviner as his fingers shape the sand into individual signs, each with its own name. In contrast, a third word refers to the actions performed before the signs are actually formed: *derhe* (‘make little piles’, ‘pile up’; for example: the small bundles of goods on display in a marketplace) is one of the frequently used Lyele verbs for referring to the act of drawing the divinatory table. The diviner repeatedly lets sand slip through his closed right hand so as to form little cones. He immediately reshapes each pile with his fingers and a small piece of calabash. Whereas the first two words (*vwàl* and *byər*) refer to these gestures for shaping the sand, *derhe* refers more clearly to the diviner pouring the sand through his closed hand.

³ Article translated from French by Noal Mellott (CNRS, Paris, France).

⁴ In a later article, Cartry (1978: 27-28, 50) showed that the sign of an animal sufficed for making the animal present during the sacrifice. He also pointed out that breaking the piece of calabash freed the signs ‘attached’ there by the diviner so that they could be conveyed to the invoked powers.

⁵ Earth as a power and as a material is related. For example, the ordeal ‘drinking the earth’ (Earth will punish the guilty party who has drunk a mixture with earth) and the earth used to build houses (the earth as a building material capable of reactions, as a ‘force’ at the construction site). See Pecquet 2004.

The gestures used to make signs, unlike the materials and tools, have seldom been the focus in research on writing. The concept of a mark – in contrast with a sign – is fundamental. We grasp its importance in Lyela divination since there is no oracle if the fox leaves no tracks. Although writing and divination both use marks to produce intelligible utterances, this does not suffice to equate them since, as pointed out, it would be necessary to analyze the arrangement and inter-relations of the signs. Just as the 'writing' on the divinatory table can be said to be the 'marks' left by a gesture, so also the fox will leave his tracks on the signs drawn on the table. The table can be seen as a set of marks not yet with a meaning until the fox tracks enable the diviner to formulate an oracle⁶.

Stories about the origin of fox divination suggest that we are dealing with a symbolic system for explaining how people learned to live in the world. The fox gave mankind the principles for organizing the world. People started asking the fox yes-no questions by making two small piles of sand in front of its burrow: 'If yes, walk there; otherwise, walk here.' The fox replied by leaving his tracks. In this respect, 'making small piles' is quite clearly a founding act. It is followed by the shaping of the signs themselves as meaning emerges. This emergent meaning will evolve beyond a mere 'yes' or 'no', as the fox tracks establish relations between the signs on the divinatory table for the diviners to interpret.

In contrast with these stories about the origin of divination, let us emphasize that divinatory sessions are not based on a binary structure of asking a question and obtaining 'yes' or 'no' as an answer. By drawing in the sand the diviner is said to 'call' the fox to come to the site (Pecquet 2007: 220). But the diviner does not necessarily ask any questions. His drawing in the sand contains 'everything that exists in the world', including a few signs referring specifically to his client – for example, signs stating that the client's father or mother is still alive, that the client is married, has children or owns a certain fetish. Furthermore, clients, when they consult the diviner, do not necessarily ask precise questions or tell him what they would like to find out.

⁶ The marks/tracks generate meaning, similar to Marchal's (1999: 164-167) discussion of the 'creative gesture' in contemporary poetry, specifically the formal aspect of a text as a 'series of marks on a surface'. As Marchal points out, Francis Ponge considered a poem to be the track of a hand holding a pen, a hand through which the 'whole body' passes. Marchal also refers to the painter Jackson Pollock, 'whose canvases were an arena for action', where an event happened: 'The touches of the painter playing like the tracks and evidence of this major event'.

Divinatory 'writing'

The surface used for divination is a large rectangle (3.5-5 m. x 1-1.2 m.) always oriented east/west and prepared starting at the east and ending at the west. Line after line, the diviner, with his fingers and a small triangular piece of calabash, uses sand to make signs of varying complexity. The diviner's work progresses at a steady pace from one sign to the next, usually from right to left (south/north). Some signs have several parts or are layered, one on top of the other. By the end, about an hour later, the rectangle is crowded with signs without any blank space between them.

This divinatory table has from 100 to 120 distinct signs, each bearing a name. The diviner has a corpus of more than 300 signs; but each table is unique. The signs are arranged in rows, certain signs seem to always appear in given positions. For instance, one row has to do with sickness, whereas certain animals or 'persons' appear in other rows; and in another position, we always come upon graves. Seemingly, diviners have their own personal version of these signs, his 'style of writing', like a personal handwriting.

The drawing of the signs starts when the sun wanes, and has to be finished by sunset. Each of the diviners present (from one to three) draws the signs for his client(s), if not for himself. The day spent in the bush closes when a diviner places a few groundnuts at the far ends of each table. For three consecutive days, groundnuts will be laid out in the evening; and in the morning, any tracks left on the tables by the fox will be 'read'. These tracks, said to be language (*zòme*), are read aloud like a series of utterances. The diviners turn the tracks on the divinatory table into oracles. When they tell these oracles to their clients, they repeatedly start by using formulas such as 'The fox said that...'.

There are, therefore, two forms of 'writing': the diviner's, which, though graphically complicated, does not generate an oracle; and the fox's, which, in the rough, serves to utter an oracle. How paradoxical that tracks in the rough – a minimal sort of writing – surpasses the diviner's complex drawings! The fox tracks draw relations between the signs made by the diviner on the divinatory table. The complexity of the graphical signs made by the diviner is not said to be a language; it cannot be 'read' like an utterance without the fox tracks. Several variables come into play when reading the tracks left on the signs, for instance, the animal's direction in relation to the cardinal points. The diviners discuss together how to interpret the tracks.

Turning the fox tracks into language, as the Lyela say, evokes for us the most widely shared definition of writing as a graphical representation of a narration to be restored by reading. This idea, though attractive, should not make us forget

that, before the fox's passage, the diviner had drawn an arrangement of named signs. Naming the signs did not constitute a narrative. The narrative emerged only when relations were drawn between the signs, which is what the fox did by walking across some signs but not others. Had the diviners not 'scarified' the earth, the fox would not have 'spoken'. The results on the divinatory table are turned into an oracle only by associating the diviner's signs with the marks left over them by the fox. As diviners point out, everything that exists is 'set down' (or 'written') on the divinatory table, along with anything that might happen. Out of this rough draft of everything possible, the fox tracks, we assume, operate by producing a pattern for formulating oracles.

More importantly, 'seeing' what has been 'set down' so as to draw an oracle out of it involves using 'medicine' (*cam*, which also refers to magic spells). Without this medicine, which is associated with a 'power', neither the diviner nor the fox has the power to 'see'. The acts of 'writing' and 'reading' could no longer be performed. This also holds if the diviner does not comply with prescriptions for preparing the divinatory table. If, for example, the piece of calabash for making the signs does not come from the same calabash as the one used for preparing the 'medicine', the fox will not come onto the table.

If we define reading by this shuttling back and forth between graphic signs and the utterances made about them, we then face the problem of the functions of diviner and fox. When analyzing in detail the signs, their arrangement and the relations made between them, what could serve as syntax? These questions are left open for further research.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have presented Lyela fox divination as if it were a sort of writing that is read/interpreted by the diviner. The metaphor relating writing and divination is useful insofar as it helps us, methodologically, to bear in mind certain concrete aspects of divination: the materials used, the gestures, etc. However, it proves less than satisfying when we try to interpret the 'meaning' of the act of divination as a 'reading of signs'.

Scholars have often associated divination with reading and writing, usually without clarifying what these concepts with many uses actually mean⁷. Even

⁷ Battestini (2006: 10) proposes broadening the core notion of writing to 'all modes of inscribing meaning', an oft repeated formula with an enigmatic heuristic utility. For other examples, see Pradelles de Latour (1991: 102) as well as Calame-Griaule and Lacroix (2006: 284-287).

when the concept of writing is clearly defined, it is hardly acceptable. Some definitions, too precise, classify part of the production of marks and signs in categories other than writing. Others too easily breed confusion by extending ordinary metaphors about 'reading' the stars, nature or the world. Real or presumed relations have thus been spun between, on the one hand, divinatory practices (or, more broadly, religion and magic) and, on the other hand, the invention and uses of writing.

Let us recall two historically attested relations between writing and divination. First of all, the use of Koranic verses in magic and medicine is close to divination. Over a wide stretch of western and eastern Africa south of the Sahara, amulets with verses written on them are used for ritual ablutions; or the writing is swallowed to cure a sickness or ward off trouble⁸. Secondly, Chinese writing, the 'daughter of divination', resulted from throwing bones into the fire and transcribing the cracks on them as 'oracular signs' (Vandermeersch 1974 and 2001). Although Mesopotamia has not delivered material evidence as solid as ancient China about the relation between divination and the invention of writing, the prevailing belief in the region was that the gods send omens. For them, the world, an 'immense page of writing' (Bottéro 1974: 161), was marked with these 'signs of nature', i.e. the writing of the gods, to be transcribed. Let us not forget that this sort of writing basically had to do with knowledge about the world and our ways of knowing⁹. This contrasts with what the Lyela say about the first encounter between people and the fox.

The divinatory table in the photographs was drawn for me, without my being aware of it, during my first visit in 1997 to a place where I would repeatedly return. As the diviner was drawing it, I learned that the table was being made for me, even without me asking any questions of the diviner. A few signs refer directly to my situation: a 'white man' (with an office and papers), a car (I had come to the site in a car), myself, my wife and two children. At the time, I could not make

⁸ See, for instance, Boulègue and Hirsch (2001). Koranic texts are used in divination outside Islamic circles (as I have observed among the Lyela); and even in these circles, what is written is not always understood (El-Tom 1985: 428); see also Hamés 1993. El-Tom provides valuable information about how the Berti swallow Koranic verses and ink as a 'medicine' against witchcraft, devils, epi-demics and the evil eye. Arabic is not the only form of writing used for as 'medicine' in Africa. According to Dieterlen (1951: 39), the Bambara treat certain sicknesses by drawing a sign on the ground, sprinkling water on it, then mixing some of the earth with the sign in water and drinking it. The 'ideograms' are anterior to the creation of their referents (Dieterlen 1951: 31). The phrase *système d'écriture*, used by Dieterlen, was latter replaced with *système graphique* (Dieterlen and Cissé 1972). On the power of writing, see the example given by Cartry (1968: 223).

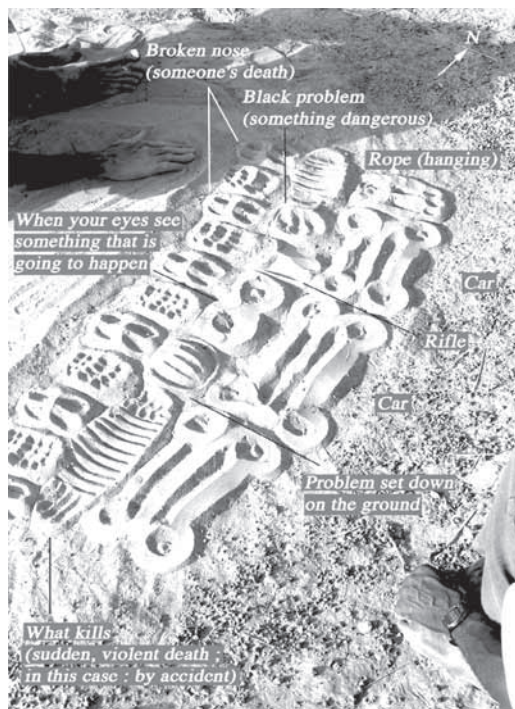
⁹ Goody 1977.

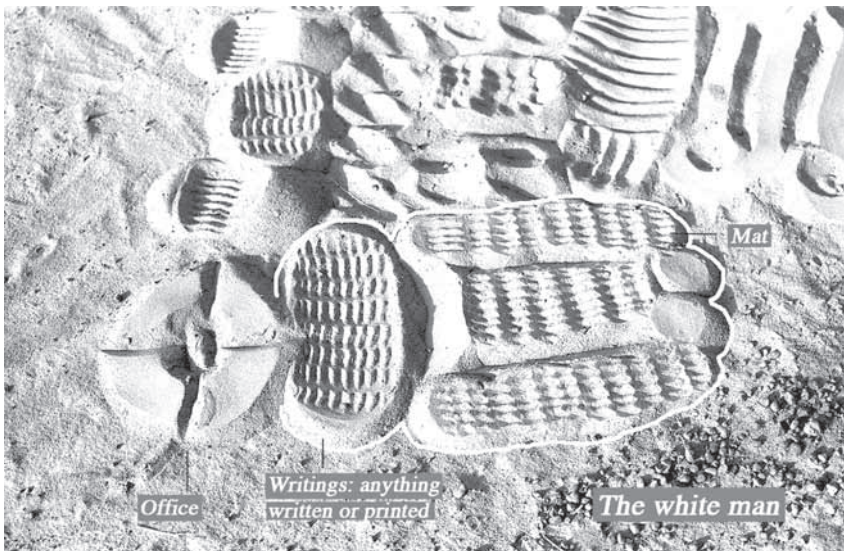
out anything in the table. Only ten years later did I realize that I had accumulated enough information to relate, for nearly all the signs, their recorded names with the photographs taken over the years. The layout of the divinatory table on these photographs is typical of what I have observed during several other sessions. The photographs of the tracks that the fox left on the table made in 1997 are of poor quality and do not figure in the series presented. Instead, the last photo of the series shows tracks of a fox in the sand at a much later divination session. To 'read' the photographs, bear in mind that the divinatory table is always oriented east-west. I am presenting this information in the rough. A given sign might have a different name elsewhere. In such a case, is there an error, or does the change of place also change the sign's meaning?

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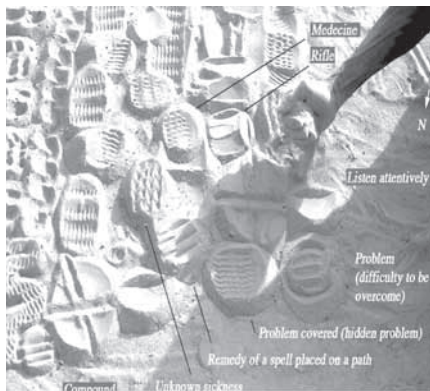
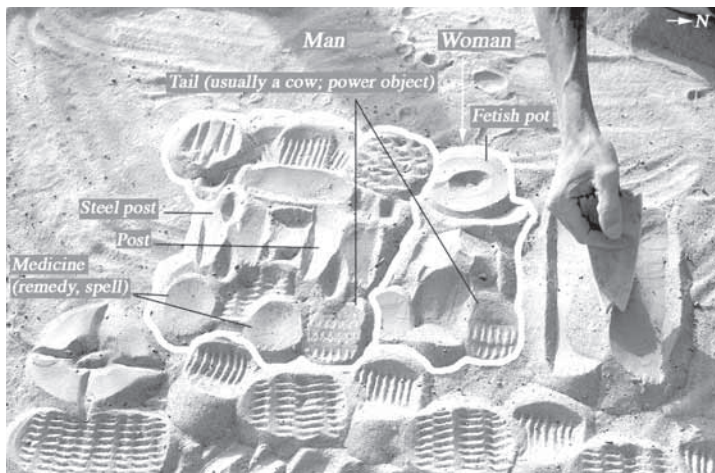
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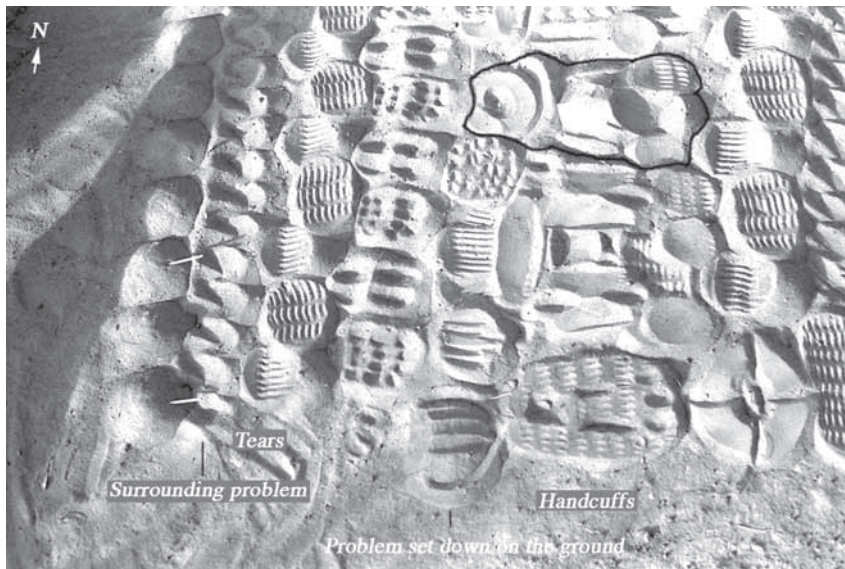
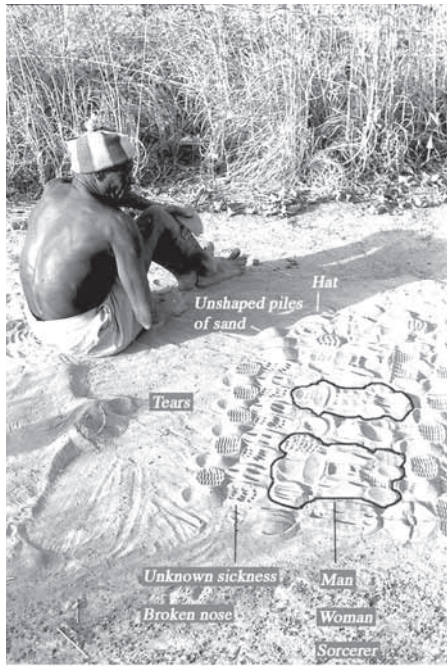
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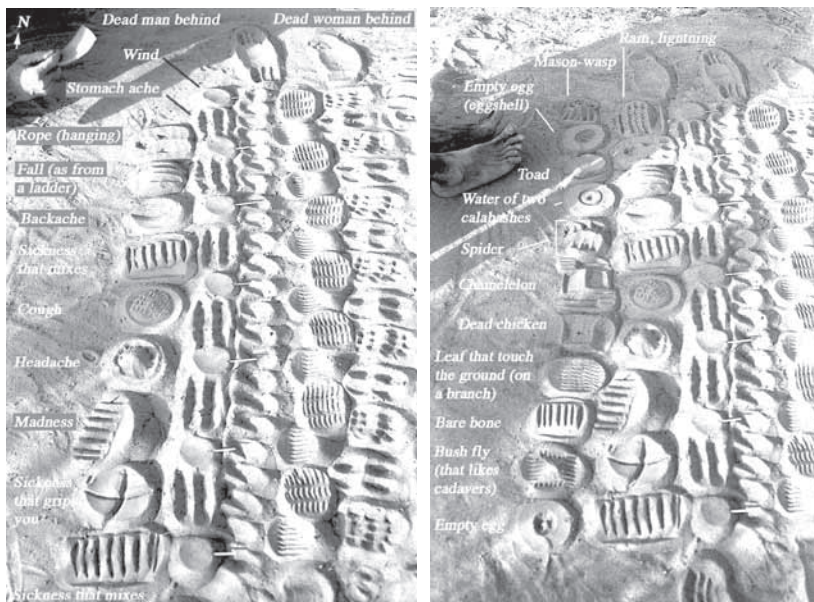


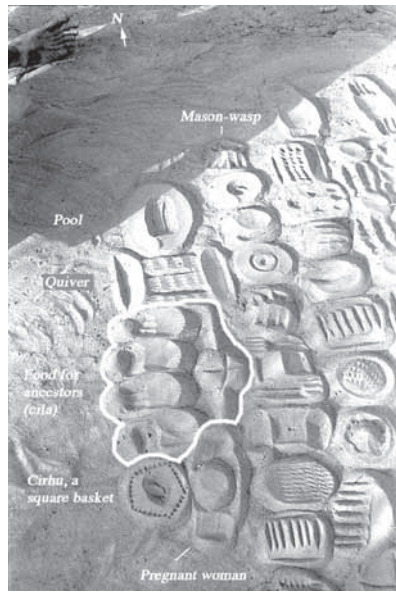
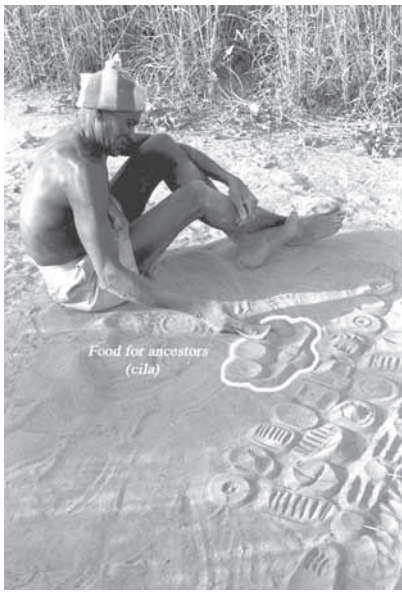


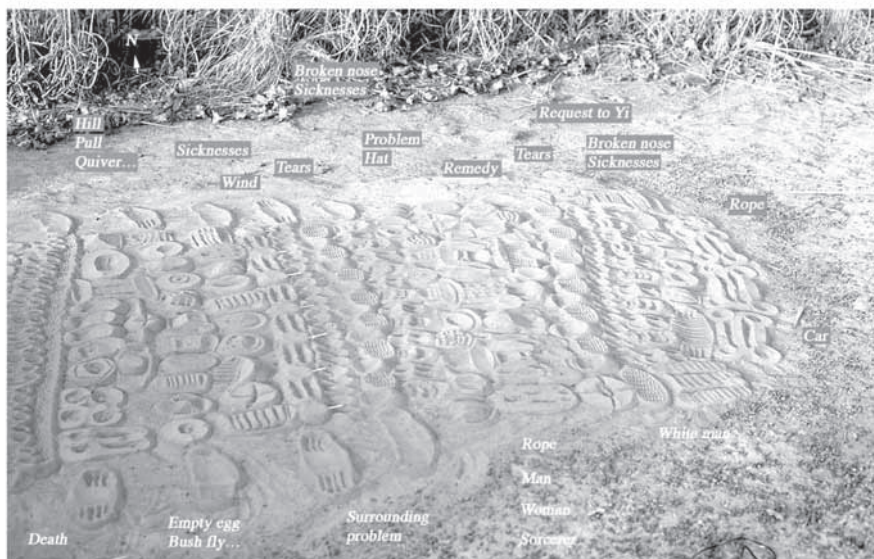
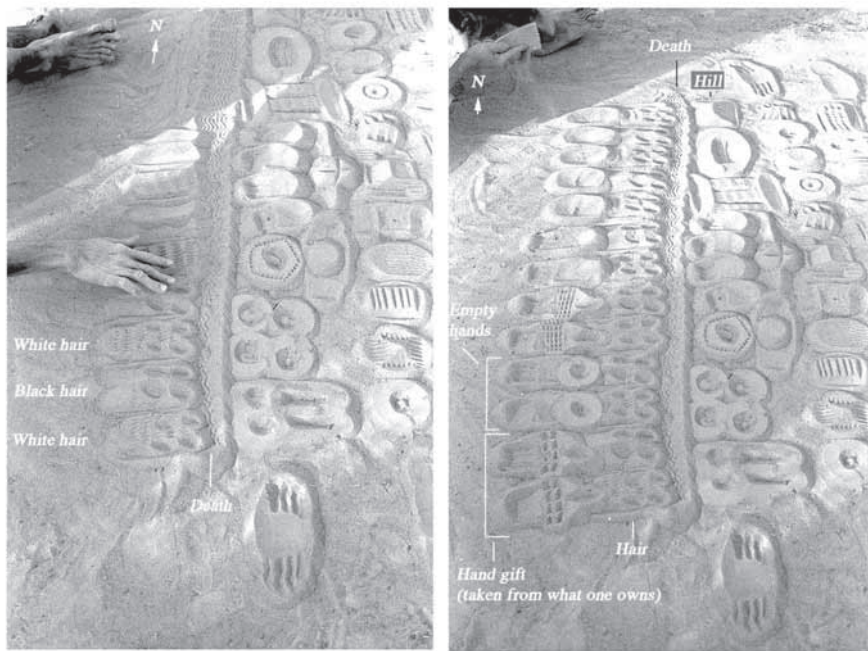


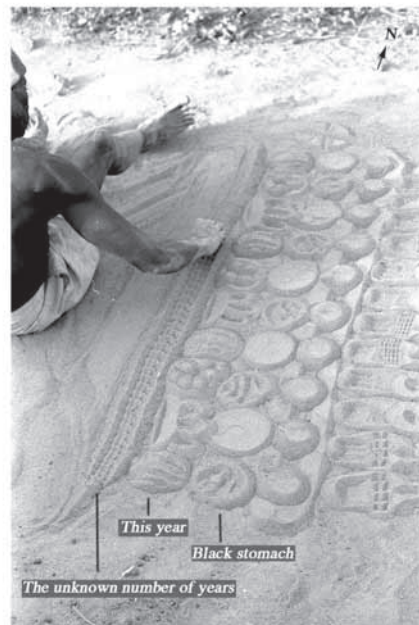
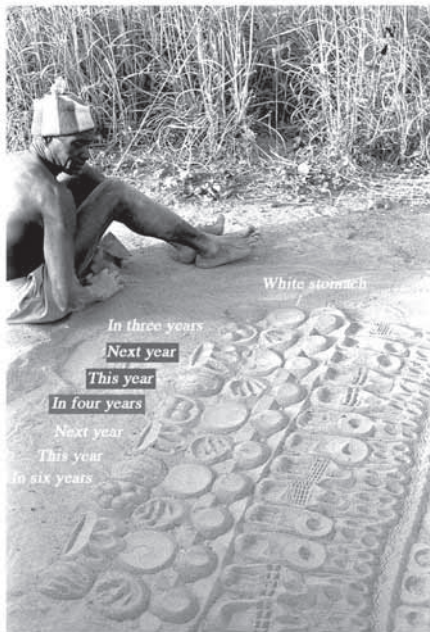
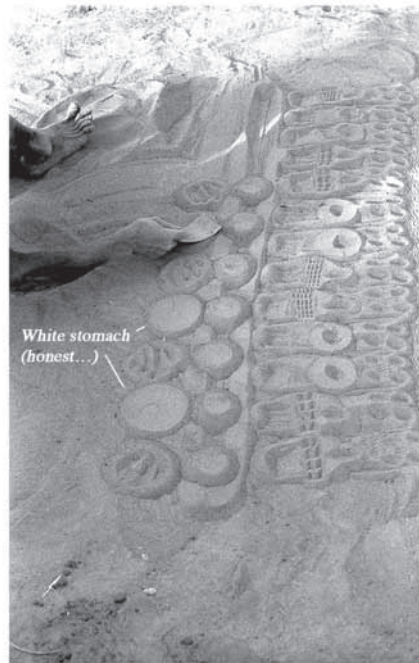
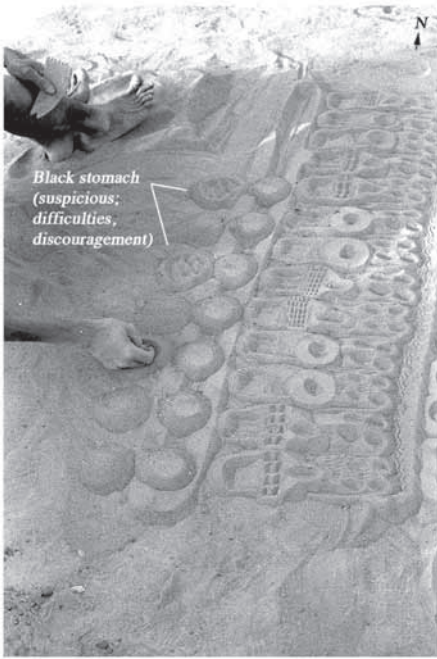




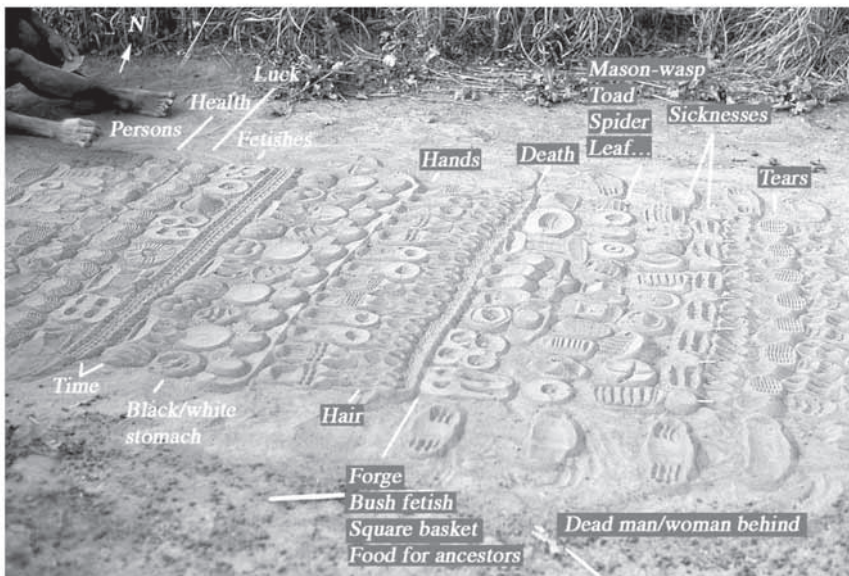
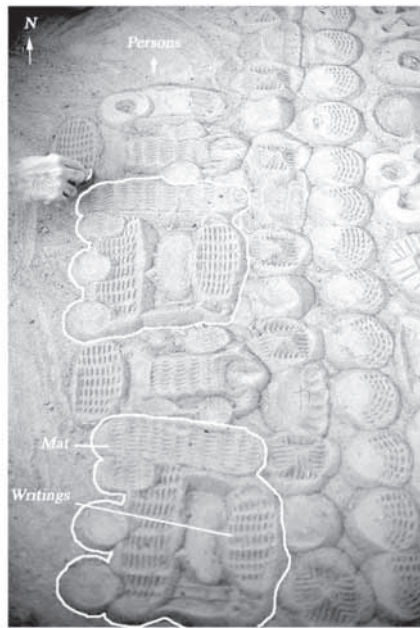
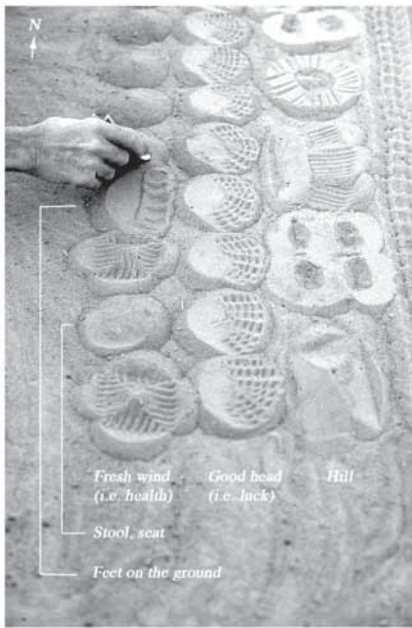


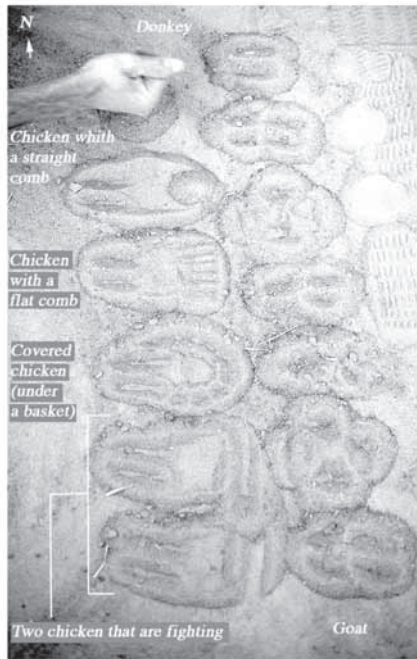


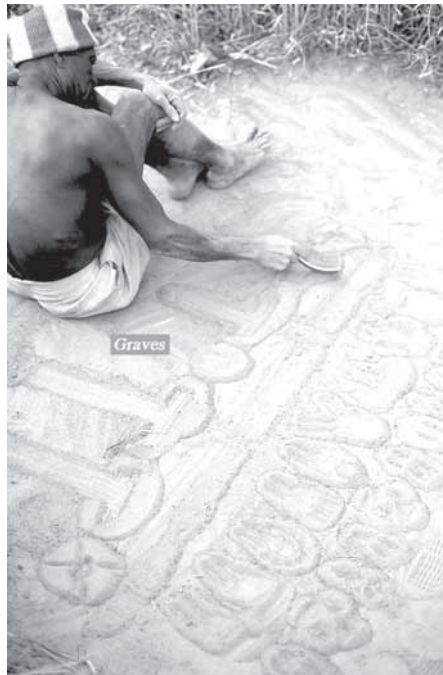
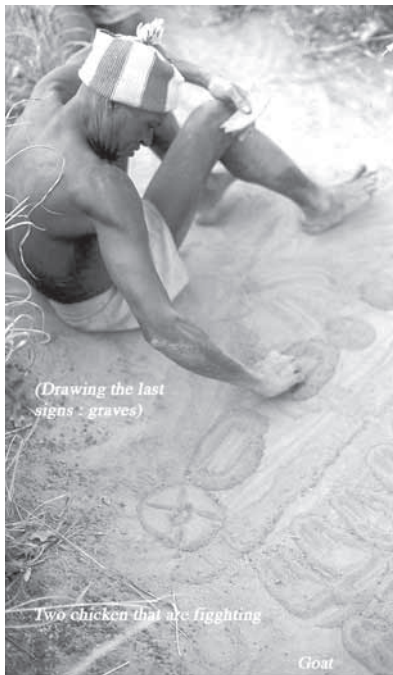














Captions of the photographs

- Car
- “What kills”: sudden, violent death (in this case, by accident)
- “Problem set down on the ground”: a difficulty to be overcome
- “When your eyes see something that is going to happen”: to “see” through fox divination
- Rifle
- “Black problem”: something dangerous
- Rope: hanging
- “Broken nose”: someone’s death
- “Unknown sickness” which has not yet happened but will
- “Incurable sickness”
- “Request to Yi”: a prayer to God
- “Water of the eyes”: tears
- “White man”
- Writings: anything written or printed
- Office: workplace or dwelling-place
- Rain, lightning
- Quiver
- Snake
- Compound
- Listen attentively (with hands on the hips)
- “Medicine” (remedy, a spell)
- An animal’s tail (usually a cow’s), a power object
- Post
- Steel post
- “Woman with a fetish pot”
- “Night man”: a sorcerer
- “Night man’s tail”: a power object
- “Remedy for a spell on a path”
- Unknown sickness
- “Problem covered with earth”: something hidden
- Hat
- Handcuffs
- “Sickness with an unknown meaning”
- “Broken nose”
- “A surrounding problem”
- “Dead man behind”, i.e. outside the compound or village
- “Dead woman behind”
- “Stomach ache”
- Wind
- “Sickness that mixes”
- “A gripping sickness”
- Madness
- Headache
- Cough
- Backache
- Fall (as from a ladder)
- “Empty egg”: an eggshell
- “Bush fly”, which likes cadavers
- “Bare bone”
- “Leaf touching the ground”,

i.e. on a branch touching the ground

- “Dead chicken”
- Chameleon
- Spider
- “Water from two calabashes”
- Toad
- Mason-wasp
- “Food for ancestors (*cila*)”
- Pregnant woman
- *Cirhu*, a square basket
- Pool
- Hill
- Forge
- “Cave fetish” for hunters
- Death
- “Hand gift”, i.e. taken from what one owns
- “Empty hands”
- “Black stomach”: suspicious
- “White stomach”: a honest one
- “White hair”
- “Black hair”
- “This year”
- “Next year”
- “In six years”
- “An unknown number of years”
- “Bush fetish”
- “Good head”, i.e. luck
- Tail, a fetish
- Ring, a fetish
- The Degali Fetish
- House
- Clan fetish
- “Fresh wind”, i.e. health
- Stool, seat
- Sleeping mat
- “Feet on the ground”
- Dog, cow, goat, donkey
- “Two chickens fighting”
- “Chicken feather broom”
- “Chicken with a white crop”
- “Chicken with a flat comb”
- “Covered chicken” under basket
- “Chicken with a flat comb”
- “Chicken with a straight comb”
- “Chicken with only one spur”
- “Chicken with twisted feathers”
- “Scrawny chicken”: has not grown
- A man’s grave
- A woman’s grave

