

Improbable research

Divine interference

Looking for a sign

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How do diviners divine? How do they achieve such dependable results? Barbara Tedlock, distinguished professor of anthropology at the State University of New York at Buffalo, analysed the mystery. Her crystallised thoughts appear in a new study in the journal *Anthropology of Consciousness*.

Tedlock explains why other anthropologists were unwilling or unable to build what she has built - a "theory of practice for divination".

The other anthropologists made a mistake. To them, divination is just "the irrational weak sister of astronomy, mathematics, and medicine: a parasitic pseudoscience feeding on these more logical, rational sciences". To Tedlock, it is more than that. "One must," she explains, "take what diviners say and do seriously."

One must also be willing to study the findings of Stephen Hawking and other modern scientists. Given that scientists are now imagining gravity-bent light "and other strange concepts that defy common-sense reality", Tedlock says, "why should we not approach divination with the same conceptual openness?"

Tedlock's theory applies to most kinds of divination, including "reading patterns of cracks in oracular bones, made from the shoulder blades of deer, sheep, pigs and oxen, or the shells of turtles. Water-, crystal-, and star-gazing, dreaming, and the casting of lots. The taking of hallucinogenic drugs, and the contemplation of mystic spirals, amulets, labyrinths, mandalas and thangkas. Reading natural signs such as the flight of birds or the road crossings of animals. Rod or pendulum dowsing, the Tarot, the Chinese I Ching, and the Yoruba Ifa readings, together with palmistry and geomancy. Contacting spirits to answer questions."

These practices are so prevalent we must assume they work, Tedlock says.

By injecting ancient, irrational practices with modern scientific analogies, Tedlock has brought anthropology to a new level of sophistication. The field has come a long way since 1983, when Nigel Barley of Oxford University published his book *The Innocent Anthropologist*. Here's how Barley described his arrival in the Dowayo village of Kongle, in the Cameroons: "I have already said that one of the joys of fieldwork is that it allows one to make use of all sorts of expressions that otherwise are never used. 'Take me to your leader,' I cried. This was duly translated and it was explained that the chief was coming from his field."

- Marc Abrahams is editor of the bimonthly magazine *Annals of Improbable Research* and organiser of the Ig Nobel Prize

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