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Marrying the "Bush Spirits-Parents"

Personal Destiny and Divination among the Sèmè of Burkina Faso

Anne Fournier

Abstract. – Among the Sèmè, a little-known society in the Voltaic area, some men receive at home a couple of bush spirits through which they get access to divination. They form groups of followers of the spirits. The rite implemented borrows its fabric from marriage, a long process that extends over a woman's entire life. The follower "marries" the bush spirits according to an original marriage arrangement without sexuality. He is bound to these bush spirits by a prenatal promise, his symbolic parents, who guided his soul and formed his character. *[Burkina Faso, Voltaic cultural area, personal bush spirit, personal destiny, prenatal alliance, transformation, displacement]*

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Introduction: The Bush Spirit Who Comes to Live at Home

In a number of societies of the West African cultural area, it is thought that some humans are personally linked to an invisible being, a bush spirit, who has chosen them and comes to live with them. The alliance is sealed by constructing an altar at the person's home after a long ritual journey. Such a pattern is found in Ghana among the Tallensi (Fortes 1987) and the Dagari (Bagré; Goody and Gandah 1981: 14), in Burkina Faso, among the Mossi (Delobsom 1934, Bonnet 1988), the Lobi (de Rouville 1984), the Kasena (Liberski-Bagnoud 2012), the Bwaba (Dugast 2015b, 2016), the Toussian[1], and the Sèmè, who are the subject of this article. The alliance can lead to the practice of divination for some of these people, with the bush spirit serving as an assistant. In these societies, as well as in others in Africa, when a human thus binds himself personally to an invisible being to access divination, rites generally exhibit the profound transformation he experiences. His appearance or behavior then changes significantly. He may even be possessed by the spirit (e. g., the Bassar of Togo – Dugast 2007; and the Anyi of Côte d'Ivoire – Duchesne 2013). A particular attire and behavior can manifest his transition into a hybrid being where he becomes half-animal, or half-bush spirit (the Yaka of the Congo – Devisch 2013; the

1 Guilhem et Hébert (1964, 1965); Cooksey (2004); Bognolo (2009).

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Bwaba of Burkina Faso – Dugast 2015b, 2016; and the Kabyè of Togo – Daugey 2016). He may even undergo a more radical transformation: an initiatory death followed by a rebirth (the Bagré of the Dagari – Goody 1981: introduction; Mwaba-Gurma diviners in Togo – de Surgy 1986: 58f.; the *bugo* of the Mossi – Bonnet 1988: 64; Kasena diviners – Liberski-Bagnoud 2011). A temporary but recurring transformation may also occur later, when the duly initiated diviner delivers the oracle. He may be in a state of possession, which then is a divination process.

During the rites of induction of a Sèmè diviner it is the transformation of the bush spirit and not that of the human that is emphasized. When he then practices divination, his appearance and behavior are little changed and, in particular, he never enters into a state of possession. His life certainly is modified by his close proximity to the bush spirit, but to express this important shift in relations the Sèmè simply resort to the metaphor of marriage. This metaphor is widely spread in West Africa, where male diviners usually see their bush spirit assistant as a spouse, while female diviners see it more as a child (Hamberger 2012). As banal as it may seem, the Sèmè metaphor is quite original. Indeed, Sèmè ethnography enriches the range of relations between the diviner and his bush spirit with a new configuration, that of the diviner who is both the spouse and the child of the bush spirit. The entity that the diviner welcomes to his home and "marries" indeed is not just any spirit from an undefined bush. It actually is the couple of bush spirits, who, in the invisible world, presided over his birth. A matrimonial union with one's parents, even if only symbolically, would lead to incest if the marriage did not include a particular arrangement without sexuality among the Sèmè. In addition, the female bush spirit is supposed to pass the last stage of its own initiation to the *dwɔ́* when settling in the home of the diviner and becoming his spouse. This probably explains why in rituals the transformation of the bush spirit is emphasized rather than that of the human who is already an initiate to the *dwɔ́*.

The *dwɔ́*, the central cult of Sèmè society, is organized around the initiation of males which includes many stages, the content of which is a well-kept secret. Initiation takes place in two cycles: one cycle of a few years, which corresponds to the accession of new initiates to the first rank, and another cycle of 40 years, which corresponds to the simultaneous accession of several generations of first rank age classes to the most senior rank. The culmination of this last stage is the *dɔ́nɔblè* rite in which they receive their "*dwɔ́* name." Men aged from 18 to 35 spend several weeks in a "bush camp." On their release they dance at a large public festival held in the village, their faces covered with animal masks that represent bush spirits.[2] *Dwɔ́* is also celebrated every year with ceremonies that set the pace for the farming activities. Other West African societies also practice the cult of *dwɔ́*. The Sèmè listed the Toussian, the Samogho, the Bobo, and the Sambla[3] but not the Bwaba, although their membership in the *dwɔ́*, nevertheless, is well known (Capron 1957, 1962; Coquet 1994). The initiation of women to the *dwɔ́*, if there is one, is considered as minor by almost all these societies, with women ostensibly excluded from the secrets or from some of them. Among the Sèmè, there is a female initiation path, the rites of which are protected by a secrecy even greater than that concerning men. Unlike almost all other societies, which dissociate the initiation path to the *dwɔ́* cult from that of marriage, the Sèmè combine them as far as women are concerned.

The purpose of this article is to decipher the marital metaphor in the rites of induction for diviners and to show the conclusions which can be drawn concerning their relationship to bush spirits. For the Sèmè, it is perfectly obvious that the path leading to the reception of a bush spirit in a human's house borrows its framework from marriage, whereas the series of allusions that appear in the rites must be shown to outsiders. Indeed, according to the usual process of the ritual, the metaphor is characterized by shortening stages and by implementing shifts and inversions, which makes it difficult for a layman to understand. Diviners and certain specialists particularly connected with the invisible world, such as the blacksmiths and the gravediggers, gave a very coherent explanation of this metaphor. They drew up a list of indices relating to gestures, objects, and actions to bring together the two sets of rituals. This deciphering not only brought to light concepts shared by these elders, but also reflected the level of knowledge and the personal views of each of them. The views presented in this article, therefore, are rather those of specialists and knowledgeable elders. Lay people have only a partial or vague idea of the representations, which form the

2 They closely resemble those described by Bognolo (2009) among the Toussian.

3 See also Hébert (1972) and Dacher (1997: 11, fn. 15): "*Dogo* is the name given to initiation among the Gouin, the Turka, and the Karaboro. It is called *do* (or *dwo*) among the Toussian, the Bobo, the Bwa, [and] *dyoro* (or *gyoro*) throughout the Lobi area."

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basis of the art of the diviners, but the whole of society accords to the implicit system on which it is based (de Surgy 2013). However, the common basis of views relating to divination is not entirely monolithic (Fainzang 1986: 19s.). Both remarks regarding the Mwaba-Gurma and the Bisa also apply to Sèmè society. To reiterate the beautiful expression of a Sèmè diviner, one must certainly admit, "everyone has his own explanation and there may be some truth in each one."

The welcome ceremonies for a bush spirit are relatively rare events and only men who have received a spirit are allowed to attend all the rites. The data come from the accounts of people reporting their experiences as novices, initiators, or mere witnesses of ceremonies, collected in Orodara and nearby Sèmè villages from diviners, healers, household heads, and *dwɔ́* cult officials during 16 months of non-continuous fieldwork between 2010 and 2017. The interviews were conducted in Sèmè jɛ́ɛn, the language of the Sèmè. Translation into French, the language of administration and education in Burkina Faso, was provided by an assistant who is a native speaker and knowledgeable of their traditions.

A short presentation of Sèmè society is followed by a relatively detailed account of the rites to welcome the bush spirit. Many plants that serve as material support in rites for establishing the relationship between the human and his bush spirit are referred to by their names in the language of the Sèmè and their botanical identification is also provided. However, the role of plants and their symbolism are only sketched out as this has been detailed in another article (Fournier 2018). The matrimonial metaphor is not deciphered in the course of the narrative but in the second section. The Sèmè concept of the alliance with the bush spirit is explained in the last section.

The Sèmè, Farmers of the Voltaic Cultural Area

The Sèmè make up the majority of the population in six villages of the Orodara Department in Kénédougou Province, Burkina Faso (Fig. 1) with a total population of 37,400, including 17,400 in Burkina Faso (Simons and Fennig 2017). Since the 1970s, they have made their living mainly from the fruit crops of mango, cashew, and orange trees but still practice subsistence agriculture of cereals and tubers and raise some cattle and small ruminants (Fournier, Douanio et Bene 2014; Bene et Fournier 2014). The Sèmè society was formed in the 17th century from a small group of people coming from the Ivory Coast (details in Fournier 2016): their language, the Sèmè jɛ́ɛn (ISO 639, Simons and Fennig 2017) is related to the Kru-group of languages.

Among the Sèmè, there is no centralized power or higher power than that of the village leaders. The village is governed by a *dyē-rɔ́!ɔ́n,* a village chief, a political authority, and by a *ɲá!án-tɔ́!ɔ́n*, a kind of earth priest, whose role is mostly religious and who is largely subordinate to the village chief. The society is divided into four groups: the farmers who are the nobles, gravediggers, blacksmiths, and griots (placed in this hierarchical order). The family is patrilineal and residence is virilocal. Villages are divided into districts, which roughly correspond to clans identified by food taboos mainly related to animals (*totem* in the French translation according to local studies). Families or groups of families are also associated with two kinds of sacred places regarding the foundation of their society, to which their members are individually affiliated. The affiliation to the sacred hills with a masculine connotation is transmitted through the paternal line; it marks the alliance with the societies that the Sèmè encountered on their arrival. The affiliation to water bodies with a feminine connotation shows more flexible rules of transmission and is more complex. Their marks refiner social subdivisions in the patrilineal groups (Fournier 2016).

Rites of Reception for the Bush Spirit

Recognizing the Call of the Bush Spirit and Identifying It

From Misfortunes to the Identification of the Bush Spirit

When a bush spirit wants to force a human to receive it, it resorts to various types of processes. It can bring down misfortunes of all kinds on this human and his entourage. It can make him waste all his wealth. It may seek to ruin the relationship with his wife by the fact that disputes break out, the wife leaves for no understandable reason or even dies, the couple remains sterile, or the children already born would die.

To determine whether the troubles are indeed caused by a bush spirit who wants to "come to one's home," an initial series of divinations is held. Once this is confirmed, the human should not delay too long to "stake down the bush spirit," in the translation given by the Sèmè of the dedi-

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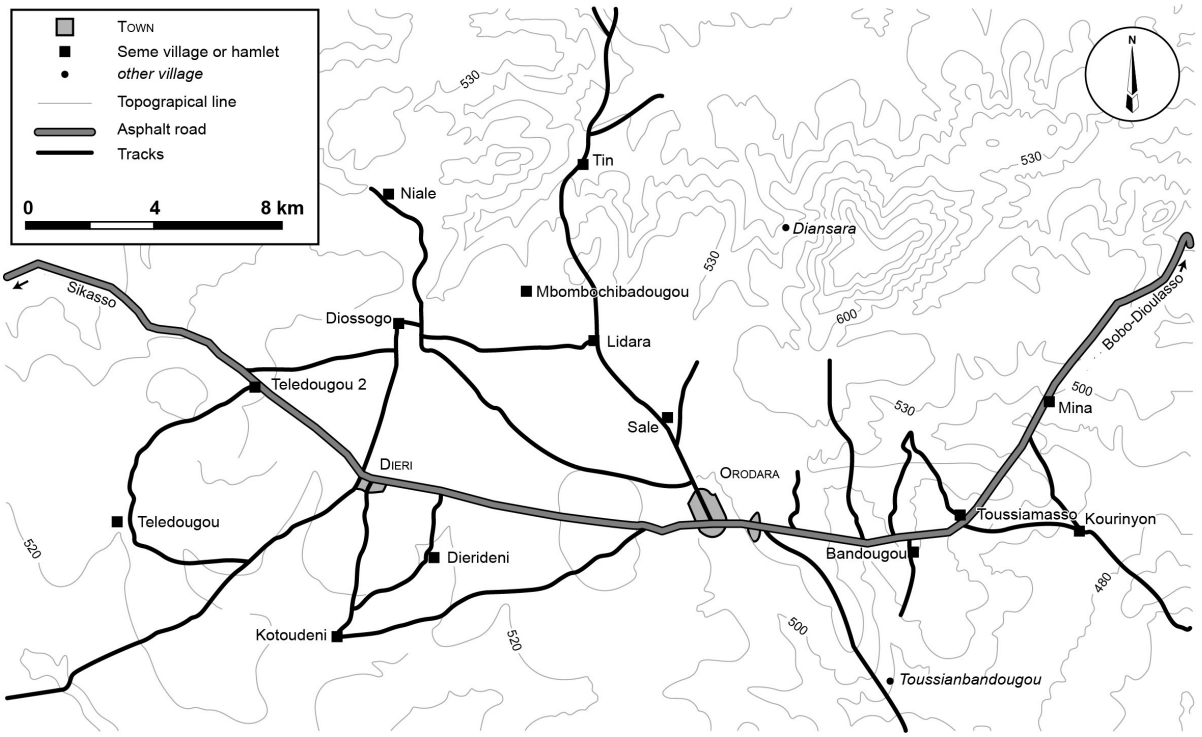
Fig. 1: Maps of the Study Area (by Douanio Manaka on a map background of 1:50,000 of the Institut Géographique du Burkina)



cated expression *koòl kpé*.[4] Indeed, as long as the person resists, his problems will only get worse. If this person is betrothed, his wedding will be celebrated as soon as possible, because one should be married to receive a bush spirit. In principle, as

4 The verb *kpé* is used to refer to a stake driven into the ground – an operation that is actually part of the installation rite – but also to describe a person or a tree that stands upright and motionless. The expression refers to ritual gestures that will be described later.

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soon as the bush spirit has been installed and, at the latest, after a ritual stage called "honoring the mother of the bush spirit," the problems cease and the bush spirit provides its protection.

By divination it is specified in which hill (or in which water course associated with a hill) the family of the bush spirit lives. There are about ten of these sacred places, with the generic name "mothers of bush spirits." Each one has its own name borne by all the bush spirits that come from there. People who have received a bush spirit from the same "mother of a bush spirit" are a group of followers who regularly offer sacrifices in this place. Only the members of this group are empowered to install ritually a bush spirit from this place in the home of a new follower.

Personal Choices of the Bush Spirit and the Approval of the Ancestors

Once the "mother of the bush spirit" has been identified, certain requirements for the installation rite – those attached to the place in question – are already known. The bush spirit must also make personal choices, revealed by divinations and led by diviners belonging to the group of followers. The bush spirit indicates, in particular, which plant is suitable for installing its altar and it sets the weekly "rest day" (*tārwɔ̄*) during which the human neither should work (to go to the field) nor have sexual relations. The bush spirit designates the male follower who is to "hold the wrist" of the bush spirit (*kpɛ̨̄n-já* – wrist catch), which means leading the ceremonies. It also chooses two women who are to play ritual roles. The bush spirit may also have particular requirements that must be scrupulously respected because it is well known how capricious and fussy bush spirits can be. Thus, it frequently demands that the new follower comply with a particular food prohibition in addition to the "totem" of the "mother of the bush spirit."

The novice and his family then obtain the sacrificial animals required for the ceremonies: goats for a hill, rams for water, and a large number of chickens to accompany them. They also prepare an expensive party to welcome the bush spirit. The lapse of time before everything is gathered together is all the longer as the novice finds it difficult to accept welcoming the bush spirit.

At the threshold of the novice's long ritual journey, it must be confirmed that the ancestors have consented to introducing a bush spirit into the family compound. It is for this reason that a sacrifice must be made to their altar, consisting of a pile of stones placed in the courtyard. The answer is given by the position in which a rooster falls when it has had its throat cut, thrown to the ground, and allowed to flap its wings. A negative response is usually only a request for compliance with obligations to invisible entities that have been neglected. The obstacle is then identified by divination and "reparations" are made. Often it is simply a question of reconciling with a relative after an argument. Sometimes a blood sacrifice is requested at one or more altars, so it may be necessary to postpone the continuation of the rite to another day. This procedure applies for all cases of "repair" that are mentioned below.

Preparation of the House for the Bush Spirit

Once all these precautions have been taken and all the preparations have been completed, the family can build in their courtyard a round house for the bush spirit, with adobe walls and a straw roof. As a miniature version of the rooms and the traditional kitchens it looks in all respects like the huts for poultry and small ruminants. A small branch of the shrub *tyɛ̨!ɛ̨n-ká!ár* (Table 1) is stuck into the top of the roof, as well as on that of other constructions that house "fetishes" (*twɛ̨̄l*) such as protective objects for war and sacred objects of the *dwɔ́* in particular. This branch will fall and disappear with time, but it will be replaced each time the roof is repaired.

Rites for the Reception and Installation of the Bush Spirit

Going to Find the Spirit "in the Bush"

On the right day – the bush spirit will have indicated it by divination – some volunteer followers accompany the man designated to direct the ceremonies to the site of the "mother of the bush spirit." In this group there is at least one diviner with his materials, because it may be necessary to carry out consultations by divination. The novice joins the group. The process of the entire ritual is the same for any other "mother of the bush spirit," even if some details may differ from case to case. Thus, the group of followers may have to fast or remain silent, except for reciting ritual texts.

Along the way, quite different plants will be collected, which then will be used to install the bush spirit. The order in which it is collected is not important, but it is imperative to have it on hand on arrival at the "mother of the bush spirit." Most groups of followers do not prohibit collecting the

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Table 1: Botanical and Vernacular Names of the Plants Cited in the Text.

Latin Binomial	Family	Name in Sɛ̀mɛ̀ jɛ́ɛn
Crowns and Transportation of the Stakes		
Cassytha filiformis L.	Lauraceae	*bāárǹ-byɛ̄l*
Construction Materials for the Altar		
Afzelia africana Sm. ex Pers.	Fabaceae	*kpá!ál*
Diospyros mespiliformis Hochst. ex A.DC.	Ebenaceae	*kɔ̄mɔ̄*
Pericopsis laxiflora (Benth.) Meeuwen	Fabaceae	*kúkwál, kpókpál*
Zanthoxylum zanthoxyloides (Lam.) Zepern. & Timler	Rutaceae	*wó*
Little Branch Placed on the Roof and the Altars		
Gardenia erubescens Stapf & Hutch.	Rubiaceae	*tyɛ́!ɛ́n-ká!ár*
Gardenia ternifolia Schumach. & Thonn.	Rubiaceae	*tyɛ̧!ɛ̧́n-ká!ár*
Meal for the Bush Spirit		
Phaseolus lunatus var. *utilis* L.	Fabaceae	*fel*
Little Winnowing Basket and Larger Basket		
Borassus aethiopum Mart.	Arecaceae	*kpɛ̄ɛ́n*
Ritual Marriage Broom		
Eragrostis tremula (Lam.) Hochst. ex Steud	Poaceae	*jànjūr*

Legend: Latin binomials according to the Conservatoire et Jardin Botaniques (2012); vernacular names according to Boyd et al. (2014) with additions.

pickets that will be used to make the bush spirit's altars a few days in advance, but they must be left in the bush. When cutting the tree that provides this wood, the followers repeat the name of the bush spirit according to a formula that is particular to each "mother of the bush spirit." Speaking strictly, this is not s a secret, but yet it should not be disclosed. Some groups also sacrifice a chicken to the tree; if it does not "respond well," divination and reparations are performed before continuing. A divination kit[5] is presented to the "mother of the bush spirit" and is activated for the novice, whereby some groups present only cowries.[6]

Before a quadruped is offered on the altar of the "mother of the bush spirit," it must be ensured – by means of offering chickens – that the bush spirit will accept the sacrifice. A negative answer would lead to a divination and possibly to reparations.

Followers also proceed with the partial charring of certain roots to which sometimes other plant elements are added. Then the only thing remaining to be done is to sacrifice a chicken to the birth water of the novice, which is the place where the female personal bush spirit resides who had helped to bring him into the world. If it is a remote place, only the person in charge of the ceremonies and the novice go there. Finally, the whole group turns back towards the village. When the bush spirit is being transported to the house of the human, everyone wears a crown of the *bāárǹ-byɛ̄l* liana that resembles a head pad.

Building the Altars

Arriving in front of the entrance of the collective courtyard of the novice's family, the followers place all the stakes on the ground. They first build the altar of the male bush spirit outside the courtyard, usually next to the building with two entrances that serves as an entrance hall. It is a wooden portico, about sixty centimeters high, and consisting of two forked stakes planted in the ground and some smaller branches placed across them. Some groups of followers put three, whereas for others this number is not so important, but never should exceed five. Some of the lianas that have been used as crowns are wrapped around the crosspieces, and then a small branch of the shrub *tyɛ̧!ɛ̧́n-ká!ár* is placed on it. Words that are particular to each group are then recited; they do not seem to have any special power.

In accordance with the protocol in effect for the "mother of the bush spirit" involved, a chicken is sacrificed on the altar that has been built to confirm that the bush spirit really wants to come to this house. If the bush spirit "refuses," a divination would be carried out and the necessary reparations would be made before continuing. As in the case of the ancestors mentioned above, a refusal on its part would be a sign that a debt remains to be settled. Some groups first sacrifice the main victim and then check with a chicken whether the sacrifice has been approved. The followers then enter

5 This material includes a flat black stone, six cowries, and the horn that contains them, a forked stick, two metal bells, and several small plant fetishes.

6 The details of these rites have not been described to us.

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the courtyard and confirm that the ancestors had accepted the installation of the bush spirit by a chicken sacrifice on the ancestors' altar. If necessary, divination and reparations are made. Then the pickets and crosspieces left outside can be introduced into the courtyard; they are placed next to the house built for the bush spirit.

Some groups of followers start embedding three small clay pots into the humid soil of the floor of the spirit house and deposit there a bunch of roots called *kóòl nāán dīìr* (bush spirit, wood, roots).[7] Another small forked root, *kóòl nāán dīìn* (bush spirit, wood, root) is placed across the pot that occupies the central position. A second portico, identical to the first one, then is built above the pots for the female bush spirit. Some groups of followers place the altar first and use only one or two pots. They then wrap the remaining crowns around the crosspieces and lay a branch of *tyé!én-ká!ár* on it. A chicken is sacrificed on this second altar to confirm that nothing prevents the installation of the female bush spirit in the house. Next, a quadruped of the same species as that offered to the "mother of the bush spirit" is sacrificed. The pots are filled with drinking water for the bush spirit: from this moment on, it is supposed to live in this house. The pots now must be supplied with water regularly. The new diviner, whose activities may keep him away from home for long periods, entrusts this responsibility to one of his wives, but still takes part in the task. The chosen woman now has to remain faithful to him.

One of the women chosen by divination and known as *bàtáàr mɔ̃ bré tɔ̃* (winnowing basket, in, place, the one who; literally: the one who places in the winnowing basket) provides a small winnowing basket made of the Palmyra palm. She is often a sister or sister-in-law of the person who receives the bush spirit. The guests place small gifts (money, cowries) in the winnowing basket to welcome the bush spirit. The woman places them on the altar located in the bush spirit's house. The winnowing basket then will be hung under the altar by the followers responsible for the ceremony where it will remain until it decays into dust; sometimes a ritual wedding broom may be added. Those roots that had been partially charred at the site of the "mother of the bush spirit" are finely crushed by the followers. They then ingest a small amount of the powder obtained and share among them the remainder to take it home.

Serving a Festive Meal

The ceremony ends with a meal separately served, on the one hand, to the group that proceeded with the installation of the bush spirit and, on the other hand, to the family and the neighbors, and friends who would have been invited for the occasion. The meal for the followers and the novice is prepared by the second woman chosen during the preliminary divinations. The bush spirit may participate in the meal of the initiates, therefore, parcels of food are deposited for it in the little house, either on the *bāárǹ-byɛ̄l* lianas of the altar or in small pieces of broken calabashes arranged on the ground in front of the pottery. However, most groups of followers serve special food to the bush spirit, which consists of a mixture of water and some powdered white seeds or, more rarely, red ones (it is a choice of the bush spirit) of the *fel* plant. This raw dish is like a kind of porridge of Bambara beans commonly eaten by the Sèmè, which of course is cooked. If they have not been able to obtain the *fel* plant, they ask the bush spirit for forgiveness by making the present of a little plant fetish called *fɛ̄l* to soothe it.

During the period immediately following its installation, the bush spirit is very vulnerable. As long as certain ingredients have not been added to the bunch of *kóòl nāán dīìr* roots (in the pots), no one should enter its little house, which is why it remains ritually closed. During this confinement, traditionally between one and two weeks (5 to 10 days), the novice assisted by his initiators must obtain other things required by the bush spirit. These may include objects to wear like rings, or roots chosen according to particular criteria (which we cannot detail here) and which will be added to the *kóòl nāán dīìr*.

During this period, the bush spirit indicates to the novice in a dream whether or not he may immediately begin to practice as a diviner. Often those who are in full activity will begin to practice divination only later, when the bush spirit asks them to do so. A bush spirit who chooses not to be involved in divination is called a *kóòl bobó* (deaf-mute bush spirit). In all cases the novice receives a protective object against witches called *sɛ́-d!á!ár* (divination tail), made of a secret mixture of ingredients, including plants. In principle, he must carry this object as soon as he leaves home, while the rest of the divination equipment remains stored there (usually in the bush spirit's little house).

7 Examples of these pots are listed in the ethnographic collections of the National Museum of Natural History in Paris where they appear under the numbers MNHN-E-2017.4.14 and MNHN-E-2017.4.15.

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Rite of Confirmation of the Alliance

Three years after the installation of the bush spirit, the group of followers returns to the "mother of the bush spirit" to perform the rite of *tyɛ́!ɛ́n nɔ̄ l!ō* (bush spirit, mother, to rise; literally: to honor the mother of the bush spirit). This rite is identical to the rite performed to seek the bush spirit, except that no more plants are collected or processed, and no crowns are worn. The same sacrifices are offered and the meal served to the bush spirit must include exactly the same dishes as for its reception.

Reaching the stage of the *tyɛ́!ɛ́n nɔ̄ l!ō* means that the bush spirit has validated the alliance. Before welcoming his bush spirit, the novice had been asked to get rid of the "bad things" he may have, that is, fetishes that could perpetrate witch attacks. If he had not obeyed or if in the meantime he had procured such things again, the bush spirit would have killed him prior to the expiry of the three or four probationary years.

Once the *tyɛ́!ɛ́n nɔ̄ l!ō* ceremony has been performed, the novice is entitled to make blood sacrifices for the "mother of the bush spirit" without consulting the older followers. Future diviners benefit from of the period prior to the *tyɛ́!ɛ́n nɔ̄ l!ō* ceremony to acquire the knowledge needed in order to perform divinations. They do this under the direction of a master who is one of the diviners of their group of followers, but the bush spirit also gives them its instructions in dreams. If the novice is quick-witted and his bush spirit helps him, this apprenticeship would not take more than three weeks.

Decrypting the Marital Metaphor

The Sèmè Betrothal

According to the Sèmè, the preliminary steps that the future diviner makes before the installation of his bush spirit are comparable to those, which would be carried out for a betrothal.

In the Voltaic societies, marriage is generally seen as a long and gradual process of transferring the wife from her parents' house to that of her husband, into which she will gradually be integrated, step-by-step, and more or less completely, depending on the society. Among the Sèmè, the wife ideally must devote herself entirely to the well-being of her home, be submissive to her husband and absolutely faithful to him. When she dies at an old age, having had children and passed through all the initiation stages, she is totally integrated into her husband's family and she is incorporated into the altar of the ancestors of the extended family. She then becomes a guardian for whom her children can perform sacrifices.

Today, there is freedom of marriage, but traditionally parents arranged marriage between a girl at the age of about 8 and a boy of about 17. The fiancée's parents received from the parents of the fiancé a ritual gift of *dolo*,[8] followed by assistance in their fields for several years. The girl then went back and forth between the two houses. As soon as she was old enough, she had sexual relations with her fiancé, but was not yet considered married. The girl's marriage would not be effective until after the *tyèl*, the first step of her initiation in the *dwɔ́*.

Although the male and female processes are separate, the Sèmè establish a very precise correspondence between initiatory grades (Table 2). The boys go through the first stage of their initiation to *dwɔ́* at the same age as the girls (around 15 years old), during a ceremony also called *tyèl*. Formerly, they were circumcised in a peer group, but today the operation is done at the clinic when they are babies. For them, the *tyèl* stage is independent of marriage, but the latter is not accessible until after the *dú ty!ɛń gb!e*, a stage that gives a sort of social majority. During this rite, they touch sacred objects that were shown to them during the stage of *ɲá-f!ɛ́!ɛ́*. Only the seven oldest initiates in each district gain access to the ultimate initiation stage, that of the "elders of the *dwɔ́*," where they hold all the secrets and perform all the rites.

Table 2: Correspondence between Male and Female Initiation Grades in the *dwɔ́*.

Female Initiation Path	Male Initiation Path
tyèl	*tyèl*
	ɲá-f!ɛ́!ɛ́ (eye to sprout or to split; literally, to pierce the eyes, to open the eyes)
fyɛ̀ gbē (*fyɛ̀*, to place; literally, to place the *fyɛ̀*)	*dú ty!ɛń gb!e* (*dwɔ́*, *dolo*, pour-put; literally: to pour the *dolo* of the *dwɔ́*)
	dɔ́nɔ (an initiate)
tyèl-dé (marriage, to enter; literally: to enter a marriage)	
	Elder of the *dwɔ́*

8 In French-speaking West Africa, the term *dolo* refers to locally made fermented beverages. The Sèmè use this term to translate a generic term that refers to both red millet beer and palm wine.

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The tyɛ̀l Marriage and the Transfer of the Bride and Allusions to It in the Rite

Even today, the *tyɛ̀l* ceremony still marks the moment when the fiancée goes to live with the man who is now officially her husband, even if they no longer practice the excision that once was associated with it. The operation was formerly followed by a period of confinement, which corresponded to the time necessary for the wounds to heal. This period of confinement is still observed, but today it is shorter. A great celebration, the *tyɛ̀l wúwɔ́ŋ* (*tyɛ̀l* - entertainment or party) is then held. The young bride holds in her hand a ritual broom made of the plant *jànjūr*. The griots sing her praises while she receives cowries, cash, and small objects in a small winnowing basket identical to the one used by boys during their own *tyɛ̀l*. She places these gifts in a larger basket (*kùkwàn*[9]; see Table 1) where they keep the larger gifts (cloths, etc.) that have been placed there directly. A woman chosen by divination, as a kind of marriage witness, would have been commissioned to make or buy this basket that she has to carry during the whole celebration. To honor the bride, the men and women of the husband's family carry her alternately on their shoulders and dance. The young woman will now live with her husband where she has her own house and kitchen. The expenses of a girl's *tyɛ̀l* are borne by her fiancé's family, which is why it is said that the husband ensures his wife's initiation.

The ritual moving of the bush spirit from the "mother of the bush spirit" to the house of the human being is interpreted as reflecting the bride moving from the home of her parents when she comes to live with her husband. The celebration held on the arrival of the bush spirit is equivalent to that held for a *tyɛ̀l*. The confinement of the bush spirit, the presence of the *bə̀táàr mɔ̰̄ bré tɔ̰̄* woman, and the little winnowing basket that she has to take care of are a transposition of the elements of a *tyɛ̀l* ceremony as well as the broom. The day reserved for a "break from sexual relations," imposed on the novice in the name of the bush spirit, suggests that the husband, if he already has one or more wife, must reserve the nights for his new wife. It is the future diviner and his family who provide for all the expenses related to the reception of a bush spirit just as in the case of the reception of a wife.

The Confirmation of Marriage, fyɛ̰̀ gbē among Humans

The second stage of the Sèmè marriage is called *fyɛ̰̀ gbē*. It expresses the harmonious relationship of the couple. *Fyɛ̰̀ gbē* is carried out individually for each wife at the discretion of the husband but with the agreement of the wife's family. This rite is usually performed several years after the *tyɛ̀l*. During the sequences that alternate between the two households, the husband's family offers food items to the wife's family and the *fyɛ̰̀*, i. e., a small quantity of uncooked food items, is ritually placed on the bride' s personal fetish of "luck." Everyone has personal "luck," represented by a small pot that is honored individually with sacrifices (Fournier 2016); that of the wife is placed at the home of her husband. When cooked and prepared, the *fyɛ̰̀* is served to the initiates with a rank of at least *fyɛ̰̀ gbē*. A ceremonial meal, to which everyone has access, is cooked with the remaining food and then served. Once the *fyɛ̰̀ gbē* has been performed, the wife has the right to perform certain marriage rites for other women.

The Marriage of Complete Integration tyɛ̀l-dé among Humans

The last stage of a woman's initiation is called *tyɛ̀l-dé* (marriage, enter; literally: enter the marriage). It is also performed at the discretion of the husband and with the agreement of the wife's family. She may then be 40 or even 50 years old. The *tyɛ̀l-dé* is a ceremony that is always held for several wives in the same household, all those of the husband and often other women of the compound. It represents a perfect union between the spouses, without any possibility of separation and enables the wife to perform all the marriage rites. The husband now has the right to "claim her body" wherever the wife may be when she dies[10] and to perform for her the rites of transmutation into an ancestor.

Certain sequences of the *tyɛ̀l-dé* are held at the husband's home, others at the homes of the family of each wife. In each of the family homes from which the wives originate, women who have already been initiated lock themselves in a room re-

9 Examples of these baskets have been donated to the ethnographic collections of the National Museum of Natural History in Paris where they appear under the numbers MNHN-E-2017.4.7 and MNHN-E-2017.4.7.

10 In practice, the corpse is symbolically "brought back" while the remains are buried at the place of death.

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served for this purpose to perform a secret ceremony. During a sequence of the *tyèl-dé*, the men of the husband's family come to seek the wife who awaits in her parents' home. They call out to her, "here is the price of your sex," throwing cowries on her, which she will keep to herself. A ritual object made up of a stack of small baskets, bordered with leather and bearing at the top strips of leather decorated with cowries,[11] is then given to her. She can use these recipients for her work (in particular at the market). The rites of the *tyèl-dé* are long and they involve several walks where all the households concerned by the event are visited, including at night. During these trips, the way is lit with a traditional lamp, the flame of which has undergone a special process to provide it with power against witches. This lamp then is given to the wife. A visit and the sacrifice of a chicken are also due to the birth water of each *tyèl-dé* wife. The *tyèl-dé* is an expensive celebration, usually paid for by the husband.

What makes the *tyèl-dé* wedding special is that a man other than the husband can pay for it as a mark of friendship or consideration for the couple. It is thus a great honor for him and for them. However, one can pay for the *tyèl-dé* only for someone from his or her own social status group or a lower-level group. In particular, the *tyèl-dé* is performed for relatives or for the wives of sons. When a man other than the husband "performs a *tyèl-dé* for a woman," he becomes a sort of a father-in-law, thus excluding him from sexual relations and marriage with her, even after the death of her husband. The woman who refers to the husband with whom she has sexual relations by the term *dèe* (husband) uses terms of respect for the man who pays for her *tyèl-dé*, such as *kyéɛ̄l* (maternal uncle) or *tɔ̄* (father). The couple then should show consideration for this "uncle" and perform small services for him. In particular, the "uncle" is entitled to expect a punctual participation in fieldwork as well as the ritual sweeping of his courtyard at the annual *dwɔ́* ceremonies: the husband takes care of the courtyard outside while the wife takes care of the inside. Lastly, when the "uncle" dies, the woman must mourn like his own wives. After the *tyèl-dé* ceremonies the "uncle" is given the traditional protective lamp and not the wife. He may keep it, but he usually gives it to her.

11 Such an assembly appears in the ethnographic collections of the National Museum of Natural History of Paris under the number MNHN-E-2014.1.11.

Tyɛ́!ɛ́n nɔ̄ l!ō, a Combination of fyɛ̧̀ gbē and tyèl-dé Marriages

The list of indices that non-specialists can provide for the reading of the rite as a marriage is limited and not devoid of blur or contradictions. In the *tyèl* and *fyɛ̧̀ gbē* stages specialists recognize a marriage between bush spirits without any hesitation; they are sure that there is a sexual union between them. However, they need time before declaring that the human who welcomes the bush spirits performs their *tyèl-dé* and that he has no sexual relationship with them.

Indeed, the rite *tyɛ́!ɛ́n nɔ̄ l!ō* appears to be a kind of condensed *fyɛ̧̀ gbē* and *tyèl-dé*, including a festive meal, a visit, and a sacrifice to the "mother of the bush spirit." It shows that the union between the human and his bush spirit has become closer. More precise indices, interspersed into the rite, suggest these two marital stages.

Thus, the special meal served raw to the bush spirit recalls the ritual deposit of a portion of raw food (*fyɛ̧̀*) on the personal fetish of the wife during the *fyɛ̧̀ gbē*. The ritual closure of the bush spirit's house fully integrates the bush spirit into the family, as does the *fyɛ̧̀ gbē* stage of the female marital path.[12] It is also reminiscent of secret rites performed inside a house by women during *tyèl-dé*. In addition, during this stage sacrifices to the birth water of the follower are performed, in the same way as they are performed to that of a wife for whom the *tyèl-dé* is celebrated.

The "divination tail" against witches given to any diviner in some respects may be seen as an equivalent for the traditional lamp given to the benefactor who supports the *tyèl-dé* of a couple. The anti-witch power of its flame is echoed by that of the mixture contained in the fetish.

We can also consider that the spatial positioning of the two bush spirits (or rather their altars) alludes to that of the couple during the ritual sweeping in front of the door and in the courtyard of the man who celebrated their *tyèl-dé*. Lastly, the divinatory work of the bush spirit as an auxiliary to the diviner can be understood as one of the wife's services she has to provide to the man who performed her *tyèl-dé*.

With regard to those bush spirits who played for him a parental role in his conception, his birth, and throughout his life, the diviner behaves like a respectful and loving son. An adult son who wants to perform the *tyèl-dé* for his wives first has to un-

12 The *dú ty!ɛń gb!e* initiation grade of a young man, which consecrates him as a responsible adult, is of the same rank.

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dertake the same for his parents, in case this not had been done yet.

The Sèmè View of the Alliance with the Bush Spirit

Tyɛ́!ɛ́n, a Concept of the Relationship between Humans and Bush Spirits

The "Domestication" of the Bush Spirit, Elements of Language

As has been pointed out several times, the rites highlight the transformation of the bush spirit and not that of the diviner. In fact, language elements confirm this. There are indeed two terms that can be translated as "bush spirit."[13]

Kóòl is a very general word that applies to all bush spirits, the good or bad ones, and whatever their relationship with humans is. Thus, it may refer to a bush spirit living in the bush with no particular link to humans, as happened in "root(s) of the bush spirit" (*kóòl nāán dīìr* and *kóòl nāán dīrn*) and "calabash of the bush spirit" (*kóòl lā kpá*). It also describes a bush spirit installed in the home of a human as in "thing to seat the bush spirit" (*kóòl ɲíné-mɔ́n*[14]) and "deaf-mute bush spirit" (*kóòl bobó*[15]).

The other term, *tyɛ́!ɛ́n*, is only used for bush spirits that have a close relationship with humans. It is found especially in "honoring the mother of the bush spirit" (*tyɛ́!ɛ́n nɔ̄ l!ō*[16]), in the name of several species of the *Gardenia* tree (*tyɛ́!ɛ̨́n-ká!ár*) used during the installation of altars for bush spirits, and in the term designating these altars. Although the full name of this wooden construction anchored in the ground is *tyɛ́!ɛ́n kɑ̨̀n* (literally: the bush spirit's legs), it is usually called just *tyɛ́!ɛ́n*, as if it *were* the bush spirit itself. Moreover, regarding the human who sets up the altar or his bush spirit, it is said that he "stakes down the bush spirit."

Such ambiguity in the use of a term designating bush spirits fits perfectly with their essentially unknowable nature and their transformative powers. In the hands of the followers it is also an educational tool when they want to explain the union of a bush spirit with a human. Thus, one of them successively declared that the altar "was" the bush spirit, then that it was more correct to say that it "made" the bush spirit, and, finally, that primarily the bush spirit is referred to as *tyɛ́!ɛ́n,* which is completely distinct from the altar. Another diviner made an additional step by explaining that it is not really the bush spirit that is in the house but rather its promise (*ɲɛ̄ntó!ó-kwɔ̨́!ɔ̨́n*; mouth, coming from, word). When asked about the meaning of *tyɛ́!ɛ́n*, several elders, who were among the most knowledgeable people on the world of the invisible, firmly stated that *tyɛ́!ɛ́n* is a bush spirit that has formed an alliance with a human. By indulging in such a play of metonymy in the vocabulary associated with the bush spirit installed at home, the Sèmè indirectly indicate that although *tyɛ́!ɛ́n* designates a bush spirit related to a human, as the elders said, the corresponding altar above all is witness of the transformation of the relationship between these two partners.[17] The process of the bush spirit's progressive penetration into human space seems to be part of the semantic field of *tyɛ́!ɛ́n* as much as the achieved result (installation of the bush spirit). This allows for a certain distancing from a too literal interpretation of the two bush spirits who come to the house.

Attempt to Define the Concept of tyɛ́!ɛ́n

The division of the bush spirit into male and female during the construction of two altars can be interpreted as indicating a transition from the status of *kóòl* to that of a domestic or domesticated *tyɛ́!ɛ́n*. During this transition, the bush spirit seems to assume the gender connoted by the spaces it moves into at each stage: first, it is male when it is installed outside the courtyard (a masculine space), then it is female once installed in a room (a female space). From this perspective, the male form of the bush spirit primarily can be seen as the path taken by the being from the bush during the transformation that allows it to live near people. Indeed, even if the Sèmè specify that the female is dedicated to divination work and that the male exercises its authority over her from the door, in other sequences of the same discussion, they can refer to the couple of bush spirits as one single individual. It should be noted that in a society where the allocation of names (at birth and during initiation,

13 We did not consider a third term, *wɔ̀klɔ̀níìn*, reserved for evil bush spirits. The word seems to have been borrowed from the Dyula language and does not match necessarily the Sèmè representations who also differ very much in defining precisely the meaning.

14 Name of the repository for the divination stone.

15 This bush spirit does not want to perform divination.

16 The last ritual stage of the welcome.

17 Regarding the *nanwamu* altar set up among the Bwaba when a bush spirit decides to have a special relationship with a human, Dugast (2015a) wrote, "It is this relationship that the object shows, not the entity that is at its origin."

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when even bush spirits receive a *dwɔ́* name) is so important, male and female bush spirits only bear one single name, which is that of the site from which they come, wherever the compound where they are installed may be located.

The Transformation of the Bush Spirit in Sèmè Oral Texts

During the divination, the diviner always relates the story of the arrival of his bush spirit. A version of this sequence includes a dialogue between the diviner and his bush spirit. The latter is presented as a unique individual who, once installed at the door, demands to penetrate right into the compound:

> The bush spirit told me to take it home and I said I could not afford it.
> Then you will not live long! [This is the bush spirit speaking]
> It's fear that made me go and see the elders and bring you home. You've been told to sit at the door and we can see each other during the day.
> No, I live in houses!
> That's why you're inside. If a word comes into the house, it is yours.[18]

Once the bush spirit has been ritually transformed into *tyɛ́!ɛ́n*, the human being and the bush spirit are in a new relationship that initiates the possibility of communication between their two usually separate worlds, the visible and the invisible. This possibility will only be fully activated, however, if the human becomes a diviner.

The idea of a transformation of the bush spirit that comes to the homes of humans is also contained in an account of the Sèmè regarding the beginnings of the matrimonial exchange. There it is said that the first human family sent to the earth by Diosso (the Creator) lived in isolation while bush spirits were already settling the land. They had never met, until a family of bush spirits who lived nearby decided to visit the humans. The bush spirits presented themselves in human form. The son of the bush spirits immediately fell in love with the human girl and asked to become a human to be able to marry her. The conclusion of the story is that the family founded by this young couple was the first with whom matrimonial exchanges began. When one has received a woman from another human group, one has to give in return one from the own group. Therefore, this story justifies the installation of female bush spirits into human families.

Historical and Mythical Resonances of Welcoming Bush Spirits

The Sèmè people were a small population group when they arrived. According to their memories, their society has grown up around a small group of newcomers through alliances (including marriages) with other people. Alliances of the Sèmè with the communities already present there had been made by sharing the sacred hills. This sharing established a link of agnatic nature between them and integrated the Sèmè into the local communities. Symmetrically, some neighbors have been incorporated into Sèmè society. Indeed, several villages were founded by a Tussian who became Sèmè after marrying a Sèmè woman. Viewed from this angle, the story of the bush spirit who changes into a human to marry the daughter of men can be interpreted as a metaphor for the assimilation of foreigners by the Sèmè. What do the couples of bush spirit-spouses receive from the diviners if not radical foreigners? The "mothers of the bush spirit" from which these bush spirits come are at the same time the places where an alliance with the neighbors was concluded and those who provide children to the Sèmè.

The Spouse-Parent Bush Spirits and the Conception of the Person

People who have received a bush spirit at home emphasize the trauma they have suffered and speak of it as a capricious intruder they had to live with. Its installation produced a break in their lives and a sort of reorganization accompanied by relief.

At another level (that of the learned commentary of the diviners), the arrival of the bush spirit is understood as an element of the personal destiny of the human and owes nothing to any whim on its part. A previous work (Fournier 2016) showed, how among the Sèmè the arrival of a new individual in the world results from the reincarnation[19] of a permanent principle called *nwɔ́ɔ* coming from generation to generation to lodge in a

18 Divination words by Mr. Gwene Traoré (September 25, 2013).

19 It seems to be a real reincarnation as in the case of the Toussian (Hébert 1997; Bognolo 2009), whereas societies in these regions are usually vaguer on the subject or present things differently (Bonnet 1988: 92; de Surgy 1983: 71; Cartry 2010: 65; and our own unpublished surveys among the Bwaba).

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new body. During the journey that the *nwɔ́ɔ* makes into the invisible, it establishes a program called *byè-myāl* (arrival, voice) before God[20] and the ancestors and freely takes on various commitments. This journey is made under the tutelage of a couple of personal bush spirits (male and female) who will look after the individual throughout his life. One of the promises then made by the *nwɔ́ɔ* may be to install his personal bush spirit at home. This pair of bush spirits that plays a role in the supervision and protection, ensures that the debt that their protégé has completely forgotten, of course, is repaid. They send various warning signs to trigger their reception process because a forgetful human regarding his prenatal promises is in danger. The support for their *tyèl-dé* marriage, provided by humans, is explained by the diviners as a testimony of friendship and recognition for the "work" they have done, as might occur between humans, especially between parents and children.

Divination and Personal Destiny: A Voltaic Representation

There is evidence in the rites with respect to the idea of destiny. The collective name of the Sèmè personal bush spirits, *ŋmīl tā kóòl* (head on bush spirit; literally: bush spirit on the head) should be compared with the use of the *bāárǹ-byɛ̄l* liana to suggest a head pad placed between the head and the bush spirit that is carried towards the house of the human. This porterage suggests, of course, carrying the bride on the shoulders during *tyèl*. However, this detail takes on a deeper meaning in light of the ideas encountered in two other societies of the Voltaic cultural area. Among the Bassar of Togo, where divination is also an element of personal destiny, they speak of a cushion on the head to evoke the prenatal debt that one has to repay when becoming a diviner (Dugast 2010). Among the Batammariba of Togo, the divination entity is also associated with human heads: the future diviners who are still children must wear a special hairstyle to provide temporary shelter for (and neutralize) the divinity of divination that enters into their bodies by the fontanel and disturbs them (Blier 1991).

Other elements of the Sèmè representations echo concepts of divination widely used in the Voltaic cultural area. As we have seen, the personal bush spirits, welcomed by the follower, come from "mothers of bush spirits," i. e., sacred hills, which seem to mediate access to divination. These hills, in principle located outside the village but near to it, are places of the foundation and origin of agnatic groups that form the Sèmè society. Each individual also depends on a "birth water," located in the community or its immediate surroundings. Although the affiliation to the hills and waters is presented as individual and there is a certain degree of freedom in this regard, members of the same lineage are generally affiliated with the same sites (see Fournier 2016). In various Voltaic societies (Tallensi, Nankana, Sisala, Bissa, Kassena), the oracular power (the "place from which the oracle flows") is likewise closely attached to the lineage of the diviner (Liberski-Bagnoud 2012) and often associated with "topical deities" (Liberski-Bagnoud 2010: 126). Thus, among the Kasena, the oracular power *vɔgʊ* (which is not a bush spirit) is associated with one of the sacred groves that ensure the "ritual construction of the origin of each lineage of the village community." These groves are the places where what remains of lineage members is deposited. In association with another power called *dɔna*, that is the exclusive property of the lineage, they make births occur in this lineage. It is through *dɔna*, a kind of "ritual mother" described as an "old backwater whose water never runs out," that newborns are integrated into their lineages. A replica of the *dɔna*, represented by a clay pot filled with liquid, is present in each house (Liberski-Bagnoud 2002: 83f., 92).

Conclusion: A Duly Programmed Reception

The Sèmè concept of the reception of a bush spirit that provides a human with access to divination undoubtedly belongs to the representations of the Voltaic cultural area, although it has certain original features.

In order to facilitate the communication between the worlds of the visible and the invisible, a human and a bush spirit must be brought together. As in other societies, it is by the insertion of a bush spirit into a human family that this essential proximity is established among the Sèmè. The main aspect of this bush spirit is its double status: at the same time it is a parental couple and a special kind of spouse. Attributing such a marital status to the bush spirit is conceivable only because there exists in the Sèmè institution of marriage an arrangement by which a man can "marry" another couple who already have passed the first stages of marriage. By interpreting the reception of a bush

20 Unlike other Voltaic societies (Liberski-Bagnoud 2010; Dugast 2010), the Sèmè do not seem to associate the figure of the sun with that of the creator god (Hébert et Guilhem 1967).

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spirit through the matrimonial metaphor, this special feature makes it possible to associate in the same institutional block various ideas relating to the creation of the person in general and of the person who is a diviner in particular.

The duration of the Sèmè marital journey and the spatial displacement it entails give an image of the effort required to integrate the human world into a being as radically alien as a bush spirit. The young wife who leaves her parents' home to come and live with a new family very gradually becomes a full member of the family who welcomes her. But to become one, she has to go through various ritual stages that are under her husband's control and which could be seen as a sort of a test: integration is the reward for good conduct. Like the wife, the bush spirit moves from its native environment of the bush to be integrated into a foreign family (here human) in several stages, however, in a reverse situation, it is the bush spirit who tests the purity of heart of the human who welcomes it.

The assistance of the Sèmè specialists is invaluable in the unraveling of relationships within the astonishing trio formed by the follower and his pair of bush spirits. The first two marital stages mentioned in the rite of welcome (*tyèl* and *fyɛ̀ gbɛ̄*) refer to the union between the bush spirits and the human. Thus, it should be remembered that every human being is symbolically engendered in the invisible by a male principle and a female principle, which then watch over him during his entire existence. The third and final marital stage (*tyèl-dé*) introduces the idea of a union of a completely different nature, that of the couple with a third party. It corresponds to the human's fulfillment of a filial duty towards the pair of bush spirit-parents, which conducted his soul and assembled the components of his person. This special marriage, which bush spirits come to demand, allows linking divination, the prenatal alliance inherent in the person, with the question of personal destiny and that of initiation.

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