

**HUTCHINS CENTER COLLOQUIUM****MAY, 7, 2025****Ifa and Geomancy:****A Comparative Hermeneutics of Divinatory Systems  
in Africa, Europe, and the Americas***Erwan Dianteill, Université Paris Cité – UFR SHS Sorbonne**Hutchins Center Fellow, Harvard University***Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

This lecture presents a tripartite research project carried out at the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, Harvard University in Spring 2025, under the auspices of Eshu Elegbara, African god of crossroads, thresholds and semiotic interpretations !

It explores the structural and symbolic convergences between Ifa divination in West Africa and its diasporas, and geomantic divination as it developed in Christian Europe. This research aims to show not only the formal and semiotic continuities between these traditions but also their shared cosmological ambition to mediate between human beings and the divine through interpretive systems based on graphic randomness, actually signs coming from non human beings.

To be clear : this research comprises three interlocking components. The first is the editorial preparation of the divinatory lectures of Aristide Falola, a master Babalawo from Porto-Novo, Benin, recorded and translated posthumously. The second is a comparative study of Ifa divination across Nigeria, Benin, and Cuba, incorporating both classical anthropological sources and contemporary field data. The third, and most hermeneutic, is a divinatory-literary interpretation of Dante's *Purgatorio* in the *Divine Comedy* as a structured system of signs shaped by geomantic cosmology.

Each component explores divination not only as religious practice but as an epistemological and semiotic system. Collectively, the project situates Ifa and geomancy within a global history of symbolic interpretation, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of divinatory knowledge across temporal, linguistic, and cultural boundaries.

## I. Geomancy and Ifa: Symbolic Systems of Interpretation

At the heart of both Ifa and geomancy lies a shared structural form: a finite set of figures or signs generated through a randomized process, later subjected to interpretation. In Ifa, these are the 256 Odù derived from binary combinations cast

using palm nuts or a divination chain. In geomancy, they are the sixteen traditional figures created from marks or points made in sand or on paper.

These signs are not arbitrary, they are generated with mathematical rigor, but their meaning is not fully stable. Their interpretation relies on a trained reader who navigates mythological, ethical, and cosmological frameworks to derive meaning. What unites these systems is their semiotic logic: they produce meaning through patterned randomness and interpretive labor, situating the diviner as a mediator between the known and the unknowable.

Geomancy, as described by Skinner (1980), originated in North Africa among Arab and Berber cultures. It was transmitted to Christian Europe during the twelfth century through Arabic-Latin translation movements. One of its earliest European expositors, Bartolomeo da Parma, described geomancy in his 1288 *Summa* as "the art of points" inspired by divine will, to be cast in clean soil and read according to their astrological correspondences.

This description frames geomancy as both terrestrial and celestial. The figures are understood as earthly manifestations of divine order, connected to the zodiac and the planets. Geomancy in Europe developed in tandem with astrology and medicine, and by the late Middle Ages it had become a recognizable, though minor, component of Christian science.

## **II. Ifa in Benin and Nigeria: Ashé, the Oracle and the Church of Ifa**

In contrast to geomancy's astral orientation, Ifa centers on ashé—the spiritual force that animates existence and authorizes ritual action. The Babalawo channels ashé to interpret Odù signs, which are linked to extensive oral corpora of myths, proverbs, and moral teachings. The diviner's task is to uncover the appropriate narrative that speaks to the client's condition.

Master diviners such as Mathias Paqui in Porto-Novo embody the depth of this tradition. The process of consultation is both performative and metaphysical,

activating *ashé* through language, gesture, and ritual materials. In this way, Ifa becomes not merely interpretive, but transformative.

The 20th century saw the emergence of African Independent Churches that incorporated indigenous cosmologies into Christian frameworks. In 1934, the Ifa Church was founded in Lagos by Olorunfunmi Adebajo Oshiga. It was soon established in Porto-Novo, merging Christian liturgical forms with Ifa theology. This church maintained the divinatory function of Ifa while adopting a new religious architecture: Sunday services included hymns, sermons based on *Odù*, and prayers to both Orunmila and Vodun spirits. Pastors continued to function as diviners, affirming the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge within a Christianized public sphere. The 16 Commandments of Orunmila offered a new ethical synthesis rooted in African values.

### III. The Falola Lectures and beyond: Transmission and Continuity

In 2018, Aristide Falola delivered a series of lectures to three professional diviners—Padonou, Kpofon, and Finagnon—in Porto-Novo. These lectures, recorded and later translated, form the backbone of the first component of this research. They document not only the technical aspects of Ifa divination but also its pedagogy, mythic logic, and local epistemologies.

Falola's teachings affirm the vitality of Ifa in Benin and its intergenerational transmission. They also allow for comparative analysis with both colonial-era sources (e.g., Maupoil, 1943) and contemporary Yoruba and Cuban materials.

My research starts from Falola's teaching and compares it with three key regions of Ifa practice:

- **Benin:** Maupoil (1943), Adjou-Moumouni (2007)
- **Nigeria:** Bascom (1969), Epega & Neimark (1995), Salami (2002)
- **Cuba:** *Dice Ifa, Tratado de Odun de Ifa, Tratado Enciclopédico de Ifa*

Initial findings show a close correspondence between Falola's teachings and Bernard Maupoil's ethnography, reflecting both oral continuity and the local diffusion of Maupoil's work. In contrast, the Nigerian sources show only weak connections, likely due to linguistic barriers and regional variation. Cuban sources surprisingly align more closely with Falola's material, explained by early access to Maupoil's book in Cuba and the influence of William Bascom's work during the 1970s, probably via Masonic networks and, later, the Internet.

Each Ifa sign is associated with a constellation of symbolic elements: colors, deities, psychological states, natural forces, and moral narratives. For instance, *Ogunda Meji* is linked to Ogun (god of iron), violence, and cutting tools. A myth attached to this sign tells of a python who evades creditors through cunning and lethal force.

Yet attribution varies. Melville Herskovits associated this story with the same sign in Dahomey, while Maupoil linked it to *Obe Di*. Among the Igbo, it survives as folklore detached from divination. These discrepancies reveal both the adaptability and semantic richness of Ifa, where meaning is never fixed but contextually reactivated.

#### **IV. Geomancy in Dante's *Purgatorio* as a Divinatory Narrative Machine**

Dante's *Purgatorio* is not merely a moral allegory; it is grounded on a divinatory narrative machine that functions through the logic of sign generation and interpretive sequencing. In Canto XIX (vv. 4–6), Dante evokes the geomantic figure *Fortuna Major* rising in the East—a privileged moment of divinatory clarity:

“when the geomancers see their Greater Fortune rise in the east, before the dawn, along a path that only briefly darkens...”

This allusion is not illustrative but operative: it triggers a dream vision filled with signs—a malformed woman, ambiguous and disturbing—that demand interpretation.

Later, in Canto XXIV (vv. 52–54), Dante defines his poetic method:

“I am one who, when Love inspires me, takes note, and as He dictates within me, so I am making signs (“vo significando”).

Here, the poet becomes a sort of diviner, channeling transcendent dictation into earthly language. The narrative structure of *Purgatorio* replicates this procedure: seven terraces of sin, each with associated signs, Judges, and cosmic laws, create a recursive system of moral and symbolic processing. Like a geomantic chart or Ifa consultation, the *Purgatorio* arranges signs whose meanings depend on their sequential and relational positions.

Dante, in this view, is not offering an allegory but building from a symbolic engine—a poietic system that produces meaning through structured ambiguity, much like Ifa or geomancy.

### **Conclusion: Toward a Global Semiotics of Divination**

This study shows that both Ifa and geomancy are formal systems for accessing the invisible through controlled randomness. Their signs are stable in form but fluid in interpretation, always embedded in specific cosmologies and social landscapes. Ifa continues to evolve today through religious innovation and transatlantic transmission, shaping and being shaped by the historical currents of diaspora, resistance, and cultural reinvention. As Prof. Gates has argued in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), African-derived systems of meaning are not static repositories of myth but dynamic, intertextual frameworks in which signification itself becomes a site of creative agency and resistance to oppression. Gates's model of “signifyin(g)” as a rhetorical and semiotic practice in African American literature—one that foregrounds indirection, repetition with variation, and semantic play—resonates strongly with the interpretive logics of Ifa. Just as the trickster figure Esu mediates the delivery and ambiguity of the oracle’s messages, the Odu function not only as vehicles of sacred knowledge but as generative units within a broader discursive field, constantly reinterpreted in response to new

cultural conditions. In this sense, Ifa is not only a divinatory system but a signifying system—an evolving narrative technology capable of encoding and decoding the lived realities of its practitioners across time and space.

Geomancy, while less prominent, remains a key to understanding the symbolic structures of early European science, at the border of magic and esotericism. The *Purgatorio* in the *Divine Comedy* exemplifies how divinatory logic can shape narrative form itself. Like a geomantic tableau or a Babalawo's tray, it becomes a surface on which the divine inscribes meanings for human interpretation. In both cases, Ifa divination and geomancy, interpretation is not a decoding of fixed messages but an ongoing process of relational understanding, mediated by myth, ritual, and inspiration.

These systems affirm that knowledge can emerge not only from empirical observation but from the disciplined reading of signs—a human dialogue with the unknown that spans continents, languages, and centuries.

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