



Exploring Communication Modes and Cultural Significance in Soothsaying Practices in Upper East Region of Ghana

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Abstract: This study delves into the communication modes and cultural importance of soothsaying practices in the Upper East Region of Ghana, employing Symbolic Interactionism and Ritual Communication Theory as theoretical frameworks. Utilizing qualitative research methods, including structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and participant observation, the study seeks to examine the diverse communicative modes adopted by soothsayers, encompassing verbal, non-verbal, and symbolic modalities. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze patterns and themes pertaining to the communication modes, methods and practices, as well as their cultural meanings. The study elucidated the cultural ramifications and societal relevance of soothsaying practices within this region, providing a comprehensive understanding of their role in local traditions and community dynamics. Among the main findings of the study revealed that placing money on the shrine or altar as part of the ritual process is viewed as a form of energy exchange, facilitating communication between the client, the soothsayer, and the spiritual entities involved. It symbolizes the client's commitment and sincerity in seeking spiritual help. Based on the findings, the study offers recommendations for preserving these practices, integrating them into broader cultural heritage initiatives, and promoting their understanding and appreciation within and beyond the local communities.

Keywords: Communication, communication modes, culture, soothsaying, cultural heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of soothsaying, also referred to as divination, represents a long-standing and persistent element in numerous cultures globally (Peek, 1991). These practices are typically performed by individuals who are believed to have exceptional spiritual capabilities to connect with divine or ancestral spirits (Mbiti, 1990). Soothsayers, or diviners, utilize a diverse range of communication modes, including oral narratives, symbolic artifacts, and ritualistic performances, to relay messages from the spiritual domain to their clients (Winkelman, 2000). This process involves interpreting signs, symbols, and various forms of communication to acquire insights into the past, present, and future (Tedlock, 2001). Soothsaying has been recorded in various forms across different cultures, such as tarot card reading in the West, the I Ching in China, and the Ifa oracle in Nigeria (Drewal, 1992; Cunningham, 2000; Yang, 2008). These practices are not merely spiritual and religious; they are also intricately woven into the cultural and social fabric of their respective communities.

Soothsaying which is deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual traditions of the Upper East Region of Ghana, holds significant importance for the Frafras, Kusasis, Nankanas, and other ethnic groups. In this region, soothsayers act as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical realms, utilizing various communication modes such as oral narratives, symbolic objects, and ritual performances to relay messages from divine or ancestral spirits to their clients (Awedoba, A. K., 2006). Oral narratives are an essential element of soothsaying in the Upper East Region. These narratives frequently incorporate stories, proverbs, and chants that are rich in cultural symbolism and moral teachings. The use of oral tradition in soothsaying mirrors the broader oral culture prevalent in many African societies, where knowledge and wisdom are transmitted across generations through spoken word (Mbiti, 1990; Smith, 2022). Symbolic objects like cowrie shells, bones, and sacred stones are utilized as communication modes in divination practices. These items are believed to hold spiritual significance and are interpreted according to their positions and patterns during the divination process (Gelfand, 1985; Johnson, 2021). Ritual performances are another crucial mode of communication employed by soothsayers. These performances typically include dances, gestures, and offerings intended to summon

spiritual entities and establish a sacred space for divination. The rituals performed by soothsayers are not only spiritual acts but also serve to strengthen community bonds and cultural values (Carey, 1989; Brown, 2023). The interaction between these various communication modes underscores the complexity and richness of soothsaying practices in the Upper East Region.

Despite its cultural significance, there is a notable gap in scholarly exploration regarding the communication modes and methods employed by soothsayers in the Upper East Region and their broader implications for social dynamics and cultural identity. While existing literature on soothsaying in Africa offers valuable insights into the overarching cultural and spiritual dimensions of divination practices, it tends to focus on well-documented practices like the Ifa oracle among the Yoruba or bone divination among the Shona, often omitting detailed examinations of communication modes (Gelfand, 1985; Drewal, 1992). Oral narratives, symbolic objects, and ritual performances are recognized as central to soothsaying, yet there is limited in-depth analysis concerning how these modes are utilized, interpreted, and contextualized within the local setting, as well as their cultural significance. This study aims to fill in this gap by scholarly conducting a detailed analysis of the communication modes used by soothsayers and their implications for social dynamics and cultural identity in the Upper East Region. It will contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of soothsaying and its role in shaping social life in the region.

The study sought to address three key research questions: the primary communication modes used by soothsayers in the Upper East Region of Ghana, how clients interpret and respond to the communication of soothsayers, and the cultural significance of soothsaying in the region. Correspondingly, the study aimed to achieve three specific objectives: to identify and describe the primary communication modes employed by soothsayers, to explore how clients interpret and respond to the communication of soothsayers, and to examine the cultural significance of soothsaying in the Upper East Region of Ghana.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Role of Soothsaying

The role of soothsayers (or diviners) in traditional African societies, including those in Ghana, is multifaceted and deeply integrated into the cultural, social, and political fabric. Soothsayers are commonly viewed as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical realms, offering guidance, predictions, and counsel to individuals and communities. Soothsayers are considered to have the ability to communicate with the spiritual realm, including ancestors and deities. They perform rituals and offer sacrifices to appease these spiritual entities, ensuring the well-being and harmony of the community (Mbiti, 1990). According to Mbiti (1990), Soothsayer's act as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical worlds, offering spiritual guidance and mediation.

In numerous African societies, soothsayers fulfill a vital function in dispute resolution. Opoku (1978) underscores the significance of soothsayers in conflict resolution, noting their capacity to deliver impartial judgments that garner respect from community members. Leveraging their perceived spiritual insight, they offer impartial judgments and solutions that are esteemed and embraced by community members (Opoku, 1978). Some traditional healers, who often serve as soothsayers, administer medicinal treatments derived from local herbs and spiritual practices. They diagnose and treat illnesses believed to be caused by supernatural forces (Awedoba, 2006). Awedoba (2006), emphasizes that soothsayers also act as traditional healers, employing herbal medicine and spiritual practices in the treatment of illnesses. Soothsayers contribute to the preservation of social order by reinforcing cultural norms and values. Through their divinations, they frequently address matters of morality and ethics, directing individuals to conform to societal expectations (Mbiti, 1990). Moreover, soothsayers wield considerable influence over political decisions and leadership. Chiefs and other leaders often seek their counsel regarding governance, succession, and significant community matters. Their approval or disapproval holds the power to sway public opinion and shape political outcomes (Opoku, 1978).

2.2 Soothsaying Practices in Global Context

Globally, soothsaying and divination serve as prevalent practices across various cultures, offering avenues to connect with the spiritual realm, seek guidance, and facilitate healing. Given the diverse cultural and spiritual contexts in which they operate, soothsayers employ a broad spectrum of communication techniques in their endeavors. In indigenous societies, such as the Navajo in North America, soothsayers and shamans utilize oral stories and symbolic objects for divination purposes. These stories often feature myths and tales imbued with significant cultural teachings and moral lessons. Symbolic artifacts like feathers, stones, and animal bones are believed to possess spiritual power and are employed to interpret messages from the gods (Farella, 1993).

In Asian societies such as China and Japan, ritualistic performances and symbolic gestures play integral roles in their divination practices. Traditional fortune-tellers in China predict the future and provide guidance to clients by employing resources like the I Ching and feng shui (Yang, 2008). These customs are deeply rooted in the intellectual and cultural traditions of Confucianism and Taoism. Similarly, Shinto priests in Japan conduct rites to communicate with the kami (spirits), conveying spiritual messages through ceremonial dances and sacred objects (Yang, 2008). In Western contexts, soothsaying practices have undergone modern adaptations, manifesting as tarot reading, astrology, and psychic readings. These contemporary methods frequently integrate symbolic objects such as tarot cards and astrological charts alongside verbal communication to offer insights and guidance. The focus lies in interpreting the symbols and patterns present in these objects to unveil underlying truths and potential future outcomes (Cunningham, 2000).

2.3 Soothsaying Practices in African and Ghanaian Contexts

In Africa, soothsaying and divination hold profound significance within the cultural and spiritual framework of numerous communities. The communication methods employed by African soothsayers are steeped in symbolism and ritualistic importance. Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, diviners known as babalawos utilize the Ifa

divination system, which entails interpreting patterns formed by palm nuts or cowrie shells (Drewal, 1992). The diviner recites verses from the Ifa corpus, an extensive collection of oral literature, to convey messages from the orishas (deities). These verses are replete with metaphors and allegories, bearing profound cultural and spiritual significance.

In Zimbabwe, Shona soothsayers, known as n'angas, diagnose and treat ailments by employing bones, shells, and other sacred artifacts (Gelfand, 1985). Through the act of tossing these items, the n'anga interprets their placements and patterns to discern the underlying causes of illnesses and recommend treatments. The spiritual and cultural significance of these findings is elucidated through a blend of oral narratives and symbolic interpretation employed in the communication process.

In Ghana, Soothsaying is practiced differently by many ethnic groups, each with their own special techniques and symbolic interpretations. Sarpong (2002) reports that soothsayers among the Akan and Ga people perform divinations using symbolic items such as stones, cowrie shells, and sacred seats. The positioning and interpretation of these artifacts, which are believed to contain the power of the gods and ancestors, shed light on a number of life issues, such as social relationships, prosperity, and health. The oral narratives, which frequently employ proverbs and metaphors to improve comprehension, are used in the communication process to explain the findings' cultural and spiritual importance (Sarpong, 2002). The Ewe and Krobo ethnic groups of the Volta Region also possess rich divination traditions. Among the Ewe, soothsayers utilize the Afa system, which involves interpreting patterns formed by stones or palm nuts (Opoku, 1978). Similarly, Krobo diviners employ analogous techniques, placing emphasis on symbolic gestures and ceremonial performances as avenues for connecting with the spiritual realm (Opoku, 1978).

The Upper East Region, the home to diverse ethnic groups such as the Frafra, Kusasis, and Nankanas, boast unique soothsaying practices that incorporate oral narratives, symbolic objects, and ritual performances. These practices are deeply entrenched in local cultural traditions and spiritual beliefs, offering guidance and insights into various personal and communal issues (Awedoba, 2006). Despite the

wealth of research on soothsaying practices worldwide and in various African contexts, there is a notable scarcity of studies focusing on the specific communication methods and their cultural significance in the Upper East Region of Ghana. This research endeavors to address this gap by conducting a comprehensive examination of the communication techniques employed by soothsayers and their cultural implications.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This study applied Symbolic Interactionism and Ritual Communication Theory to delve into the communication modes and methods of soothsayers and the significance attached to these practices. Symbolic Interactionism theory, as articulated by Blumer (1969), focuses on how individuals generate and interpret symbols in social interactions. This framework is pertinent for comprehending how soothsayers and their clients decipher symbolic objects and rituals within the cultural context, highlighting shared meanings and the construction of social reality. Additionally, Ritual Communication theory, as outlined by Carey (1989), scrutinizes how communication practices, particularly rituals, forge and reinforce social bonds and cultural values. This theory aids in analyzing the role of ritual performances in soothsaying and their influence on community cohesion and spiritual beliefs.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilizing structured interviews and observation tools to obtain in-depth insights into the communication modes and methods and practices of soothsayers, as well as the cultural significance of soothsaying in the Upper East Region of Ghana. Thirty (30) participants were involved, comprising 15 soothsayers and 15 clients. The clients included 8 males and 7 females who had consulted soothsayers for problem-solving purposes. Participants were selected from various traditional areas within the Upper East Region, including Bongo, Tongo, Zebila, and Navrongo. The participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling. The sample size was determined based on the predominant area of the practice. Researchers also spent time

observing soothsayers during divination sessions to gain further understanding of their practices and communication methods. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze patterns and themes pertaining to the communication modes, methods and practices, as well as their cultural meanings. The interpretation of the data was guided by Symbolic Interactionism and Ritual Communication theory, which emphasized the construction of meanings and the role of rituals in the context of soothsaying.

3.2 Data Analysis

A coding scheme was developed to categorize the themes that emerged from the findings, specifically addressing the research questions. Themes such as the modes of communication utilized by soothsayers during consultations with their clients were coded. Additionally, themes pertaining to whether clients of soothsayers comprehended the communication modes and methods employed by the soothsayers were coded, along with themes derived from the data on the cultural significance of soothsaying.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to safeguard the rights and well-being of participants. Prior to their involvement, participants were thoroughly briefed on the purpose and scope of the research. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring that participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were also assured of the confidentiality of the information provided, with explicit guarantees that their identities would remain anonymous throughout the study.

In alignment with the recommendations of Creswell and Creswell (2018), ethical considerations were meticulously observed at every stage of the research process. Researchers bear a fundamental responsibility to protect participants from potential physical harm, embarrassment, or threats that may arise during the study. Furthermore, Creswell and Creswell emphasize the importance of upholding principles of social justice and integrity, irrespective of a participant's social status, religion, tribe, or gender. This commitment to ethical rigor underscores the critical role of respecting participants' rights and ensuring their protection,

which is essential for obtaining culturally sensitive knowledge and generating valid constructs from the data collected.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Primary Communication Modes

The findings revealed that in the Upper East Region, soothsayers utilize a diverse array of communication mediums and modes in the discharge of their duties during client consultations, often conducted in traditionally structured homes. Some of these communication modes and mediums include cowrie shells, bones, sacred stones, calabashes, feathers, herbs and plants, drums and rattles. Others were animal skins, staff of authority, divination sticks (dowsing rods), ritual sticks, oracle sticks, ceremonial sticks, gourds, amulets and charms, as well as masks, money, animal sacrifice, and pouring of libation. Importantly, these items serve not only as communication tools for divination but also carry significant symbolic meanings, playing an integral role in the communication process between the soothsayer and the spiritual realm.

4.1.1 Cowrie shells and bones

All 15 soothsayers in the studied locations emphasized the significance of cowrie shells in their practices. According to them, cowrie shells are linked to the water spirits and are employed to convey messages from these spirits. They highlighted that cowrie shells symbolize prosperity and protection.

One of the Soothsayers from the Bongo traditional area emphasized:

"Most of us soothsayers frequently incorporate cowrie shells in divination processes. Through casting or throwing them on the floor, we can spiritually interpret messages based on their positions and patterns,"

Another intriguing revelation from the findings is that, in addition to cowrie shells, soothsayers also utilize bones as a communication medium to connect with ancestral spirits. A soothsayer from Zebila in the Kusal traditional area stated:

"We use bones to interpret past, present, and future events based on their positions after being cast. Animal bones, especially those of birds or small animals, are used in divination practices." (Key Informant, 2024).

This explains the symbolic communication with the spiritual world using these materials.

4.1.2 Calabash

The study also revealed that soothsayers utilize the calabash as a medium of communication, symbolizing fertility, nourishment, and the earth's womb. A soothsayer from Nayagania of the Navrongo Traditional area stated:

"In the discharge of our duties to our clients, we use calabashes in rituals to communicate with the spirits, requesting fertility and nourishment for our clients. We believe that the calabash represents the womb of the earth. We have consistently observed positive outcomes for our clients whenever we perform this ritual and others." (Key Informant, 2024).

4.1.3 Sacred stones

Eighty percent of the soothsayers indicated that they also utilize sacred stones as a medium and mode of communication in the discharge of their duties. They explained that sacred stones are believed to encapsulate the essence of the earth and are utilized to ground spiritual energies, symbolizing stability and permanence.

"We collect stones from specific sacred sites believed to have sanctity and use them as part of our rituals and divinations. Sacred stones are incredibly vital to us, akin to any other form of communication mode. They spiritually symbolize the essence of the earth, grounding spiritual energies and representing stability and permanence. Through their use, we have been able to address most of our clients' challenges and fulfill their desires." (Key Informant, 2024)

4.1.4 Feathers

As researchers, our curiosity led us to inquire why the soothsayers were utilizing feathers as part of their communication tools. They explained that feathers symbolize communication with sky and air spirits. Furthermore, they elaborated that feathers represent freedom and transcendence. According to them, bird

feathers, particularly those from sacred birds, are employed in ceremonies and as part of the soothsayer's attire.

4.1.5 Herbs and plants

The participants noted that herbs, integral to their toolkit, serve purposes of protection, healing, and enhancing spiritual communication. They explained that various herbs and plants are utilized in the preparation of concoctions, amulets, and cleansing rituals. According to them, different herbs and plants possess specific spiritual properties.

4.1.6 Drums and rattles

According to the soothsayers, they utilize musical instruments such as drums and rattles to evoke spirits and establish a rhythmic atmosphere conducive to trance and communication. Participants noted that the sound of drums and rattles is believed to attract spiritual entities and facilitate communication between the soothsayer and the spirits. A participant from the Tongo Traditional area expressed,

"Before my consultation with a client, I have to play my drum and rattles to invoke the spirit to begin my work. It is only when the spirit responds to my drums and rattles that I can effectively and efficiently address the needs of my clients." (Key Informant, 2024).

4.1.7 Animal Skins

According to the participants, they also utilize skins of animals such as goats, cows, or leopards in the performance of their soothsaying activities. They explained that animal skins symbolize strength, protection, and the power of the animal spirit. These skins are used to channel specific energies during rituals. Participants further noted that such animal skins are employed in ceremonial attire or as mats during divination sessions.

4.1.8 Divination Sticks (dowsing rods), Staff of Authority and Ritual Sticks

The participants explained that divination sticks are believed to serve as channels through which spiritual forces communicate. They interpret the movements of these sticks as responses from the spiritual realm,

providing answers or guidance. Sometimes referred to as dowsing rods, these sticks are utilized to locate objects, sources of water, or to communicate with spirits. During separate observation scenes, as researchers, we observed soothsayers holding their sticks and observing their movements to interpret messages.

Regarding the staff of authority stick, participants stated that it symbolizes power, wisdom, and the soothsayer's role as a mediator between the physical and spiritual worlds. Often adorned with carvings or symbols significant to the community's beliefs, the staff, typically carried by the soothsayer, represents their authority and connection to the spiritual world. It is used in ceremonies and rituals.

In the case of ritual sticks, participants explained that they are utilized in various rituals, including blessing ceremonies, protection rites, and healing practices. These sticks may be waved, pointed, or struck against the ground. According to respondent;

"Ritual sticks are imbued with spiritual significance and are believed to channel energy. As soothsayers, we use them to invoke blessings, ward off evil spirits, or direct spiritual energy during the performance of rituals."(Key Informant, 2024)

4.1.9 Gourds, Amulets and Charms

According to the participants, gourds are utilized to store sacred substances such as water, herbs, or grains used in rituals. They symbolize fertility, life, and the sustenance provided by the earth. Additionally, they are considered vessels of spiritual energy.

Regarding amulets and charms, participants believed that they possess magical properties and offer protection against evil spirits, misfortune, and illness. *"These small items, often worn or carried, are used for protection, luck, or to attract specific outcomes."* (Key Informant, 2024).

4.1.10 Money as Communication Medium during Consultation

The findings revealed that within the context of soothsaying practices in the Upper East Region of Ghana, the money offered by clients holds significant meaning and serves multiple purposes within the

cultural and spiritual framework. Clients offer money to the soothsayer before or after the consultation as a gesture of respect and appreciation for the services rendered. This act signals the commencement of the spiritual interaction and demonstrates the client's readiness to engage in the process. Moreover, the monetary offering signifies gratitude for the spiritual guidance and assistance provided by the soothsayer, acknowledging their expertise and the value of their role in the community. Placing money on the shrine or altar as part of the ritual process is viewed as a form of energy exchange, facilitating communication between the client, the soothsayer, and the spiritual entities involved. It symbolizes the client's commitment and sincerity in seeking spiritual help.

During rituals, money might be placed on the altar or given to the soothsayer for specific purposes, enhancing the spiritual connection and ensuring that the ritual has all necessary components. Additionally, the money supports the sustenance of the soothsayer and their practice, enabling them to continue providing services to the community. This financial support reflects the community's recognition of the soothsayer's contributions. In many instances, the money offered is used to purchase items necessary for rituals, such as candles, herbs, or sacrificial items, enhancing the efficacy of the rituals performed. "The act of giving money is a symbolic gesture that represents the client's investment in the process and their belief in our abilities as soothsayers. It signifies the client's faith in the spiritual process and their hope for positive outcomes," remarked one of the soothsayers. The money offered by clients in soothsaying practices in the Upper East Region of Ghana plays a multifaceted role, encompassing respect, gratitude, spiritual exchange, sustenance, and ritual efficacy. It is an integral part of the communication process between the client, the soothsayer, and the spiritual entities, underscoring the deep cultural and spiritual significance of these practices.

4.1.11 Communication Value of Animal Sacrifice and Pouring of Libation

According to the participants, the blood of sacrificed animals during rituals serves as a powerful mode and medium of communication, conveying messages to the spiritual realm. They emphasized that it symbolizes life and renewal, with each animal

holding specific symbolic meanings. For example, a goat might symbolize strength and resilience, while a chicken represents purity and sacrifice. Furthermore, the liquid used in pouring libation during ritual performances acts as a conduit for spiritual communication, carrying prayers and messages to the ancestors. One key participant elaborated on the significance of these practices after the consultation process: "Pouring libation onto the ground acknowledges the earth as a sacred space that connects the living with the spiritual entities. Both animal sacrifices and libation rituals highlight the importance of respecting and preserving traditional practices and beliefs."

The participant continued, "Pouring libation shows deep reverence for the ancestors and spirits, recognizing their importance in the spiritual hierarchy. The willingness to sacrifice an animal demonstrates the client's commitment and sincerity in seeking spiritual help. The sacrifice reflects the principle of reciprocity, where offerings are made in exchange for spiritual favors, showing deep respect for the spiritual entities." Moreover, the ritual maintains a continuous connection with the spiritual realm, ensuring ongoing communication and relationship with the ancestors. Libation rituals often involve the participation of multiple individuals, fostering a sense of inclusivity and unity within the community. Sacrificial rituals also involve the community, reinforcing social bonds and shared cultural values.

4.2 Clients Reasons for Consulting Soothsayers

The inquisitiveness drove the researchers of this study to probe into why people go into the consultation of Soothsayers. The Participants who were made up of 8 males and 7 females cited a number of reasons for going for the consultation of Soothsayers. While five (5) of the males' respondents stated that they went into the consultation when they were seeking for political positions, job promotion and successful marriage, the other three (3) male respondents cited prosperity, good health, good education for their families and the pre-burials of their family members. The seven (7) female respondents indicated they wanted to become rich through their businesses and to get good husbands to marry and to procreate. To quote from one of the male participants;

"My brother was appointed the political head of our District after he had consulted a Soothsayer in the community and performed some rituals upon the directive of the Soothsayer. "I had the belief that after consulting this Soothsayer I will also succeed. I was really appointed after the consultation of the Soothsayer and made to perform some rituals by sacrificing a bull and pouring of libation to my ancestors." (Key Informant, 2024)

Another female respondent stated that unlike before after consulting a Soothsayer and made to perform some ritual, her business boomed. "Initially I never belief in Soothsaying but I got to believe them when I was persuaded by my friend to consult one which I did and made to perform some rituals which led to the growth of my business. One of them said;

"I'm now rich and takes good care of my family and siblings." (Key Informant, 2024)

However, one of the female respondents stated that she did not succeed in getting what she wanted after engaging a Soothsayer and attributed that to her inability to follow all the directives given by the Soothsayer. She, however, stated that all of her friends who went with her to the Soothsayer had their dreams realized after performing all the directives given by the Soothsayer through ritual. She cited for instance that one of her colleagues who was barren and went her to see the Soothsayer had given birth to a bouncing baby.

4.3 Clients Interpretation and Respond to Communication Modes of Soothsayers

On clients understanding and perceptions of the communication modes employed by Soothsayers during consultation periods, most of the respondents indicated they did not understand the communication modes of soothsayers and indicated that they only understand the communication message of the Soothsayers after they have been interpreted by the Soothsayer himself or the persons who accompanied them and have in-depth knowledge of the Soothsayer communications messages. However, about 80 participants indicated that they believe the messages of the Soothsayer after the interpretation. One of the participants indicated that the demeanor and the non-verbal cues of the Soothsayers during the performing their duties sound very convincing and make them believe him. Others

were also of the view that many people who consulted the Soothsayer had their dreams come through and stated that they are optimistic that their dreams would also come through.

4.4 Cultural Significance in Soothsaying

Soothsaying, or divination, holds profound cultural significance in many societies, including the Upper East Region of Ghana. The practice is intertwined with cultural beliefs, spiritual traditions, and community identity. Among some of the cultural significance themes that emerged from the findings of this study include: Cultural Heritage Preservation, Spiritual Guidance and Healing, Community Cohesion, Decision-Making and Conflict Resolution, Cultural Identity and Pride, Education and Socialization, Symbolism and Ritual.

4.4.1 Preservation of Cultural Heritage

As researchers during our field visits, it was observed that the Soothsayers in the discharge of their duties to their clients often involve oral narratives, myths, and proverbs that have been passed down through generation to generation. These stories carry cultural values, moral lessons, and historical knowledge, helping to preserve and transmit cultural heritage within the community. This resonates with previous literature (Mbiti, 1990).

4.4.2 Spiritual Guidance and Healing

It was also observed that the clients who go for consultation to the Soothsayers believed that the Soothsayers possess spiritual abilities to communicate with the divine or ancestral spirits. The Clients including many community members in the studied locations stated that they have the strongest conviction that Soothsayers provide guidance, predict future events, and offer remedies for spiritual and physical ailments. According to them this spiritual guidance is essential for maintaining the spiritual well-being of individuals and the community.

4.4.3 Community Cohesion

Aside the above the finding revealed that Soothsaying activities bring about Community Cohesion. For instance, during our observation to

the field as researchers we realized a Soothsayers in the Wonkongo area of the Tongo Traditional area, after consultation for early rains for farming attracted key community leaders and heads of families for the performance of ritual for the early rains. To quote from one of the key participants when we probed to find such ceremony involving community members, he said:

“Soothsaying practices often involve communal rituals and ceremonies that bring community members together. These rituals reinforce social bonds, strengthen community identity, and promote solidarity among group members.” (Key Informant, 2024)

4.4.4 Decision-Making and conflict Resolution

Soothsayers play a crucial role in decision-making processes and conflict resolution within communities as revealed by the finding. In all the studied locations the participants stated that Soothsayers are consulted for advice on important matters such as marriages, disputes, and community development initiatives. Their insights are often used to mediate conflicts and restore harmony within the community.

4.4.5 Cultural Identity and Pride

The study revealed that Soothsaying practices contribute to the cultural identity and pride of communities. The ritual and the activities of Soothsayers in a particular community depict the cultural identity and the pride of such community members. As pointed out by Sarpong, (2002), Soothsaying practices are seen as integral components of local culture and are valued for their role in maintaining cultural distinctiveness amidst external influences

4.4.6 Education and Socialization

Soothsaying practices serve as a form of education and socialization, especially for younger generations. In almost all the study areas, the Soothsayers indicated that they were groomed by their forefathers to take over the practice and added that based on this they are also training young ones the practice to takeover when they become older and cannot longer practice.

“Apart from the training of our young ones we are also teaching them the cultural norms, ethical values, and social responsibilities through stories, proverbs, and moral teachings embedded in the divination practices”.(Key Informant, 2024). This resonates with Awedoba, (2006) whose study indicates that moral teachings are embedded in the divination practices.

4.4.7 Symbolism and Ritual

The study finally established that symbolic objects and ritual performances used in soothsaying in the studied locations carry deep cultural meanings. For example, we observed that, the arrangement of cowrie shells and the recitation during divination sessions are symbolic acts that connect individuals to their cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs.

5. DISCUSSION

From the above analysis it could be seen that the use of the items as communication modes highlighted in the findings is central to the Soothsayers' ability to communicate with the spiritual realm. Each item serves as a communication mode or a conduit for spiritual energy, and their manipulation during rituals is believed to elicit responses from spirits, ancestors, or deities. The interpretation of these responses is a highly skilled practice, rooted in the soothsayer's deep understanding of cultural symbols and spiritual beliefs. Per the findings Soothsayers in the Upper East Region, also known as diviners or traditional priests, use a variety of items in their practices. These items are not only tools for divination but also carry significant symbolic meanings and are integral to the communication process between the soothsayer and the spiritual realm as well as the clients. The items used by the Soothsayers also have cultural significance bearing on community members. For instance, the initiation of animal sacrifices and the pouring of libations by Soothsayers in some communities in the Upper East Region of Ghana are deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual practices. These rituals serve as significant means of communication with the spiritual realm and carry essential values that underscore the community's beliefs and practices.

Soothsaying practices are not just about predicting the future or interpreting signs; they are deeply embedded in the cultural and social fabric of communities. These practices help to maintain

cultural continuity, promote community cohesion, and provide spiritual and moral guidance to individuals. This resonates with previous literature which indicates that Soothsayers contribute to the preservation of social order by reinforcing cultural norms and values. Through their divinations, they frequently address matters of morality and ethics, directing individuals to conform to societal expectations (Mbiti, 1990). That apart, these practices highlight the rich symbolic interaction within the community, where meanings are created and transmitted through ritualistic use of objects, fostering a deep connection between the material and spiritual worlds. This interaction underscores the importance of maintaining cultural heritage and traditional knowledge systems. This resonates with previous literature. Sarpong (2002) reports that soothsayers among the Akan and Ga people perform divinations using symbolic items such as stones, cowrie shells, and sacred seats. The positioning and interpretation of these artifacts, which are believed to contain the power of the gods and ancestors, shed light on a number of life issues, such as social relationships, prosperity, and health. The oral narratives, which frequently employ proverbs and metaphors to improve comprehension, are used in the communication process to explain the findings' cultural and spiritual importance (Sarpong, 2002).

6. CONCLUSION

Understanding the cultural significance of soothsaying and communication modes of Soothsayers is crucial for appreciating its role in shaping the identity and social dynamics of communities in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The communication process in soothsaying involves the interpretation of these items' positions, movements, and interactions during the divination ritual. The soothsayer serves as a mediator, interpreting the messages from the spiritual realm and conveying them to the individual's seeking guidance. This process is deeply rooted in the belief systems and cultural practices of the communities in the Upper East Region.

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