1. Introduction

Anthropological research in the Francistown area, Botswana, since 1988, has drawn my attention to a system of divination which is widespread there and which features conspicuously in the area's various non-cosmopolitan medical systems (van Binsbergen 1991, 1994, 1995 and in prep). The system involves the manipulation of four small rectangular or triangular tablets made out of wood, bone or ivory; in the area's main languages these tablets are named hakata, akata, or ditaola. Being typically handmade by the diviner or his or her teacher, there is some variation among the tablets, but a typical set can be described as follows. A zigzag border on the front side of each tablet identifies this from the back, so that it is clear which side is up. The four tablets are distinguished from one another by name and features. Two have notches at the bottom; these are considered the junior tablets, the male—commonly called Lumwe—with one notch, the female—commonly called Ntakwala—with two notches. The remaining two, senior, tablets are marked as either female—commonly called Kwarne—by the incised picture of an eye or a house on the upper side, or as male—commonly called Chilume—by the picture of an axe or a spear (cf. diagram 1).

Being thrown all in one go out of the cupped hands in which they have been shuffled, the fall of the four tablets assumes different configurations, depending on which tablets face up and which face down. If we consider the set of four tablets as the random generator which it clearly is, its mathematical properties can be summarised as follows: the tablets constitute four (k) ordered elements (for they are unequivocally distinguished by physical characteristics and name), which can each assume two (N) different values (facing up or down), resulting in a total of \( N^k = 2^4 = 16 \) different configurations, e.g. \( 1 \ 1 \ 1 \ 1 \), \( 1 \ 1 \ 1 \ 0 \), \( 1 \ 1 \ 0 \ 1 \), \( 1 \ 1 \ 0 \ 0 \), \( 1 \ 0 \ 1 \ 1 \), \( 1 \ 0 \ 1 \ 0 \), \( 1 \ 0 \ 0 \ 1 \), \( 1 \ 0 \ 0 \ 0 \), etc., which all have
the same probability (of 1/16) to occur at any throw. All these sixteen configurations have been recognised and named, each has its standard praise which the diviner may utter as a first reaction to the fall, and each is interpreted according to a complex, conventionalised yet unwritten catalogue which the diviner has learned by heart in the course of his or her years of training. In the catalogue, each configuration can be interpreted under a number of different aspects at the same time (ancestors, sorcery, property, totem animals and clans, bodily referents, social referents etc.), so that there is considerable room for manoeuvring in order to suit the client's predicament. A divination session consists normally of a series of twenty to forty throws, interlaced with questions and commentaries by both diviner and client; under the diviner's skilful management, the series of falls present an unfolding, revealing story of which the client is the protagonist. The system as practised in Francistown today does not display what Werbner (1989) in his penetrating study of a kindred rural divination system among the Tswapong of Botswana has called microdramatics: the configuration is interpreted abstractly and as an ensemble in its totality, merely on the basis of which tablets face up and which down; no allowance is made for the spatial positions which the tablets occupy vis-à-vis one another, nor are the individual tablets seen as representing protagonists in the social dramas, hunting activities etc. in which the client is involved.

A striking feature of the Francistown system consists in its fragmented and kaleidoscopic nature in terms of nomenclature, iconography and interpretative catalogue. The oracular system as described shows features which do not match closely with the local symbolic system, language and cosmology of contemporary users. To my knowledge, no