

FOUR TABLETS

A Southern African divination system in its transregional and historical context

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1. Introduction

Anthropological and oral-historical field-work on religion and socio-political organization in four locations on the African continent has provided my main empirical inspiration since the late 1960s (highlands of northwestern Tunisia, 1968, 1970; urban and rural Zambia, 1972- ; rural Guinea Bissau, 1983; urban Botswana, 1988-). This has led to a number of international publications including two monographs, whereas other monographs are now in an advanced stage of completion. Applying, over the years, the successive paradigms of classic structural-functionalist anthropology, neo-Marxism, post-structuralism and globalization, as current over the past quarter of a century, my work has at the same time displayed a number of constant concerns which have lend a certain unity to my scholarly production over the years: the problematization of the relation between religious forms and contents on the one hand, and social, economic and political organization; the emphasis on history as a necessary component of any social science analysis; the exploration of the methodological challenges which such a historical orientation poses in semi-literate or illiterate social contexts; a combination of social-science methods (including those of participant observation and quantitative, statistical approaches) with those more current in the fields of literary and philological studies; the aspiration to proceed, from the specific, usually extremely limited, geographical area and time period covered by anthropological field-work, to the consideration of fields of relations and historical processes which extend over much wider stretches of space and time, and which typically cut across national, ethnic, linguistic and cultural boundaries; and finally the political and philosophical reflection on the limitations and possibilities of intersubjectivity between actors and the researcher in cultural including religious research, in a bid to reduce north-south subordination and imposition in the production of knowledge.

It must however be admitted, of course, that the market (including career) pressures on academic production, and one's individual growth as ascholar, do not allow for a consistent overall pursuit of such constant themes throughout all of one's scholarly output over a 25 year period.

2. Divination in an urban local setting in Southern Africa today

Divination is one of the virtually universal features of human religious systems, and one with which my earlier research frequently brought me into contact. The topic however did not become a major research interest for me before I started, in 1988, my current research on urban culture in a small but rapidly growing town: Francistown, in Botswana, southern Africa.

Despite the enormous emphasis, in public social behaviour in the Botswana context (and not only among the affluent middle class), on elements derived from the intercontinental, global domain of manufactured mass consumption and electronically transmitted mass culture, and despite the easy availability of cosmopolitan (= 'western') medicine and Christian churches, the town's religious and therapeutic scene turned out to be dominated by non-cosmopolitan idioms of religion. Here a threefold division applies between (a) African Independent churches — which amazing degrees of continuity vis-à-vis the local non-Christian tradition, (b) pragmatic herbalism and (c) ecstatic cults. Despite their divergence, these three cultic complexes have much in common:

- their (usually loose) association with Southern Africa's High God cult (that of Mwali, whose main cultic centres are in Southern Zimbabwe);
- their adoption of a formal organizational façade vis-à-vis the modern state and economy (e.g. in the form of government-registered churches, or associations of traditional healers) while at the same time persisting in organizational forms and principles of greater antiquity and, sometimes, of limited acceptability for the state;
- *cleromancy*: this term in general refers to divination based on the interpretation of the fall (which cosmopolitan natural science and mathematics would see as determined by blind chance, but which local actors tend to interpret in terms of the meaningful intervention by invisible beings) of a number of material objects, in this specific case the Southern African practice of divination with four tablets. These are made out of wood, bone or ivory, each of similar but not identical shape, seldom exceeding 10 cm for the largest dimension. Their names, iconography and associated religious ideas turn out to be remarkably widespread throughout Southern and South Central Africa, and to systematically vary within a rather narrow range. Local divination systems either make exclusive use of these tablets or combine them with other elements (astragalus — heel — bones of domestic animals, fragments of cattle hoofs, shells, stones, pieces of tortoise shell, idiosyncratically chosen items of European manufacture, etc.) so as to make more complex divinatory sets.

3. A set of problems and challenges

The wide spread of four-tablet divination, and the attending consistency of the system in Southern and South Central Africa, pose a number of interrelated questions of considerable methodological and theoretical interest. The pursuit of these questions will constitute the central argument of the book whose provisional working title appears at the top of this proposal. The proposed contents of the book are presented below but not yet in the form of a chapter outline.

3.1. *The inner workings of the four-tablet divination system in urban Botswana*

Before a local cultural feature as studied at a given moment, such as a particular divination system, can be situated in a more comprehensive matrix of space and time, one needs to know how the system works in the specific setting in which it has presented itself for detailed anthropological research. In the course of anthropological field-work over the years 1989-91, I received extensive training from several major local diviners, and as a result I was registered as a member of one of the two Botswana associations of traditional healers in 1990, while ‘graduating’ as an accomplished ecstatic spirit medium of the Monarch Lodge in 1991; this lodge is associated with the Nata shrine (northern Botswana), and more strictly tributary to the Njelele shrine (Matopos highlands, southern Zimbabwe) of the Mwali cult. No embargo of secrecy rests on the knowledge which I acquired in those contexts.

A detached, scholarly description of the four-tablet system would explore:

- the iconography of the four tablets, which bear distinct marks on one of their two sides, as well as optional indentures and a hole;
- the *mathematical properties* of the system, through which in principle sixteen distinct and named, equiprobable configurations are generated;
- the *interpretational catalogue* which, even if not written, yet formally and highly consistently attaches specific interpretations to each of the sixteen configurations, in such a way that each configuration can be interpreted along a number of different dimensions at the same time (ancestors, wealth, sorcery, social relations in the client’s immediate circle, ethnic relations, the animal kingdom etc.)
- the *attending social and ritual practices* which govern the handling and keeping of the tablets, the relationship between practitioner and client, the empowerment of the practitioner as a diviner and the relationships between practitioners (e.g. their lodges, professional associations, rivalry);
- the subtle *process of communication*, performance, illumination, and redress between practitioner and client during the session, in which the authority and credibility of the divination apparatus is reinforced and the client is given new clues for interpretation of his situation, future action, and the restoration or strengthening of his identity.

3.2. *Beyond the case study: Theoretical and methodological observations*

The analysis under 3.1 would in its own right constitute a contribution to the anthropology of religion and of Africa, and — to judge by the current literature — students of African divination would be inclined to stop there. They would be partly justified in doing so on the grounds that understanding a local divination system requires so much specific knowledge of the local world-view, symbolism and social organization, that one cannot expect data of similar quality to be readily available for comparison in adjacent regions and historical periods. Yet the latter type of historical comparison (not always called by that name) has successfully, and as a matter of course, been undertaken, by historians of religion and philologists, for divination in other parts of the world, e.g. the Arab world, classical Antiquity, and the ancient Near East.

Although the globalization paradigm has recently come into fashion among Africanists, the consideration of vast stretches of space and time as a fundamental requirement of cultural analysis is still far from standard practice. On the contrary,

built into the popular versions of the globalization paradigm as applied to Africa, seems to be the idea that it is only recently, under the influence of the technological accomplishments of the twentieth century A.D., that more or less discrete and bounded, peripheral local societies and cultures in Africa came to be drawn into the orbit of world-wide processes involving of symbolic exchange, the inroads of new notions of time, causality and the person, form and value, pertaining no longer to any specific local society but to the (North-Atlantic dominated, capitalist, industrial) global world in general. For most Africanist anthropologists the hallmark of professionalism is still the monograph on a well-studied local socio-cultural field, often defined in geographical terms or by means of an ethnonym, and basically synchronic. This perspective has been prevalent in the study of Africa, ever since, around 1940, the structural-functionalist paradigm of British social anthropology triumphed over earlier modes of anthropology. For Frazer — a leading anthropologist at the turn of the twentieth century — anthropology was a science of ethnographic detail (which he too often treated out of context), but only in so far as these details served comparison and the study of origins. For many anthropologists of the first half of the twentieth century anthropology was about cultural history involving broad regional clusters of socio-cultural convergence or diffusion. A Manchester School of diffusionism (Elliot Smith, Perry), now sunken into oblivion, preceded Gluckman's far more successful Manchester School of synchronic (and subtle, and valuable) ethnographic studies of limited socio-cultural fields mainly identified by ethnonyms.

In African studies today, historical interest has largely shifted from the pre-colonial to the colonial period, and questions of origins and spread have become virtually anathema. Comparison has become relatively rare, and tends to be haphazard and methodologically flawed as compared with, e.g., the rigorous comparative methodologies which were (albeit still on the erroneous assumption of bounded and culturally specific ethnic groups as viable units of analysis) developed in the 1950s and 1960 under the name of 'cross-cultural comparison', for which the massive documentation system of the Human Relations Area Files was then created. One should seek to explain (in terms of the history of ideas and of the ideological — i.e. colonial and neo-colonial — dimension of north-south relations since the nineteenth century) this sad and ridiculously condescending reduction of (the image of) African societies to the status of isolated and eminently local fragments which are still waiting to become part (through the globalization process of the second half of the twentieth century!) of the global field in which the culture of mankind is being formulated and exchanged.

Another shortcoming of contemporary Africanist anthropology is its fixation on social relations, enduring forms of social organization, power relationships, and ideology. There is no doubt that these are highly significant aspects of societies whenever and wherever; but at the same time they are relatively intangible and ephemeral. Their study therefore, especially in an illiterate or semi-literate context, depends on the researcher's personal interaction with the actors, and his empathy (the Weberian *Verstehen*), and thus is highly subject to ideological projections. Mainstream Africanist anthropology has, as antiquarian, virtually given up the study of material objects which was such a major concern in a century of Africanist scholarship before the middle of the twentieth century. As a result, a deep gulf now divides museum Africanists, who as a small minority have continued the old preoccupation with material culture, and the great majority who congratulate themselves on having taken on allegedly more relevant and topical aspects of the African reality. As a result, with all the talk of globalization at present, there is very

little sophistication available among Africanists with regard to the analysis of the *material* items which invariably carry the contemporary globalization process, from jeans trousers to stereo's and stethoscopes. I myself have also been trained in an anthropology department where the study of culture excluded that of material culture, and I have now to catch up with considerable arrears in theory, method, literature and experience.

Much more is involved here than an aesthetic appreciation of material objects. There is reason to assume that material culture is far more vital in any social process and culture than 'social' anthropologists have been prepared to admit. If the habitual objects of study of social anthropology as identified above tend to be intangible and invisible, they are so not only for the outside researcher but also for the actors themselves; as such they often escape such predictability, social control, and endurance as are essential for the continuity of any socio-cultural system. If a family unit endures, or a cultic system, or a political high office, or a divination system, it is not only because of the invisible web of social relations, ideologies and collective mental representations in general surrounding and defining them, but also because they have a clear-cut and standardized *material expression*, which can be seen and publicly contested by all actors concerned, in the form of a house and its furniture and implement, temples and ritual paraphernalia, palaces and regalia, and — in the specific case of divination — the material objects that constitute the diviner's apparatus, or even the reference books that make up his interpretational catalogue. In addition to the human body — which, at least by comparison to the enormous variation of culture and social organization, can be said to be fairly standard the world over, producing fairly standard physical and psychological experiences among humans — material objects are among the few categories of objective elements in social life, and they account for at least part of the stability and repetitiveness which modern social science tends to attribute, in stead, to the relational and ideological patterning of social behaviour. Therefore, the study of material culture — not in isolation but along with that of more main-stream sociological and anthropological topics — implies a timely 'materialist' critique of the idealism of current social science.

Since in the last analysis globalization is a result of the mathematical properties of the earth's shape (on a globe's surface sustained spatial movement emanating from any one point is bound to reach all other points), there is not the slightest reason why globalization should be a phenomenon confined to our own age and time. In fact, the social-science position is at least short-sighted in the light of such evidence on relations and fields of exchange at a continental and intercontinental scale also in Africa and around Africa, as has been revealed by comparative linguistics, archaeology and the history of art. The ideological construction of 'Africa' in modern (social-science) scholarship has amounted to the — probably spurious — claim of a conceptual socio-cultural unity (encompassing an entire continent, which admittedly makes sense at the level of geology and biogeography but far less obvious as a unit of cultural and social study) which from the point of view of the global dynamics of world culture is claimed to be, at the same time, fragmented, peripheral, passive, irrelevant, yet (by the unexpected convergence between the 'development' optique, the critique of North Atlantic domination, and militant forms of Black consciousness) sacrosanct. By this last adjective I mean that today there is pressure, in the field of public opinion, and in the politics and public relations of African studies, to stress the identity and dynamics of (pre-colonial) African societies with as little attention as

possible to intercontinental exchanges which might be seen as a denial of African originality, creativity and identity.

It is particularly in archaeology and the history of art — disciplines which have made it their almost exclusive business to deal with material culture — that theoretical and methodological inspiration will be sought for the formidable problems that the anthropologists encounters when he decides to step out of the confines of the ethnographic study based on personal field-work, and to explore wider fields of relationships in time and space. In the context of the present argument, we are prompted to do so by the remarkable trans-regional patterns attending a particular item of material culture — the four-tablet oracle.

There is admittedly the danger that such an exploration might not rise above mere historical curiosity and the temptation to haphazardly explore the riches of humanity's intercontinental cultural inheritance using a small token feature, in this case four-tablet divination, as a guide to exciting, kaleidoscopically shifting patterns of historical and systematic connexions — in the fashion of popular television productions about the advances in modern science. The abundant non-scholarly, popular literature on divination (of late often in a New Age context) is full of methodologically flawed and factually eclectic, or simply wrong, grand schemes, poorly referenced if at all, stressing global or even universal connections; it is not the intention of the present study to emulate that genre, however attractive its sales figure may be. However, there is a fundamental and scholarly reason to embark on this project. The *history* of a cultural item (an institution, an idea or an artefact) is not just an optional appendage which one can opt to consider or to leave out of consideration. Anthropologists accustomed to synchronic analysis within very narrow geographical boundaries generally assume that the meaning of their chosen object of research entirely and exclusively has to be read from the symbolic coherence and interactional convergence *within* the local socio-cultural field, which presumably can be assessed by tapping, through participant observation and questioning, the conscious mental contents of the local actors. Structuralist and post-structuralist symbolic anthropology, of course, has already made it eminently clear that much of the structuring within a local socio-cultural field does not reflect conscious acts of conceptualization and volition on the part of the local actors but an underlying symbolic deep structure of unspecified (but probably distant) provenance in time and space; psychoanalysis and deep psychology have made similar claims. Cultural items have, not as optional characteristics but as part of their essence (perhaps as their very essence *tout court*) dimensions of space and time extending over thousands of kilometres and thousands of years. This means that the analyst can rightly claim meanings and systematics for his object of study far exceeding the conscious grasp of the local actors. The analyst doing so seeks to identify patterns of human culture which, without necessarily being universal, yet link local practices and conceptions to a much wider field in time and place. This has for instance been the rationale of recent work (similar both in scope and in topic to the present project) such as Janzen's on the twentieth -century idiom of *ngoma* (the musical ecstatic cult) all over Africa south of the equator, and Ginsburg's on the idiom of shamanism as implied in myth, ritual and witchcraft eradication all over Europe and Asia over three millennia or more. The meaning of an object of cultural study, then, only *partially* lies in the local socio-cultural field and largely lies outside of it — and it is high time that also the Africanist cultural analyst goes out to look for that large portion outside, on the basis of the inspiration derived from a painstaking scrutiny of the relatively small portion which falls inside the local field and which is uniquely accessible through participant observation in field-work.

With such a theoretical and methodological perspective, the significance of the present project is not diminished by the relative triviality, esoterism, or politico-economic insignificance of the apparent subject matter, four tablet divination. The real subject matter of this book is Africa's place in cultural history — and that is a political-economy issue of the first magnitude.

3.3. form and variation of four-tablet divination in Southern and South Central Africa, and beyond

Although the relevant archaeological, historical, ethnographic and travelogue literature is dispersed, and often old, obscure, and odd by today's standards, it does provide an unexpected wealth of comparative information concerning the form and variation of four-tablet divination within Southern and South Central Africa. This evidence allows us to trace the emergence and spread of the four-tablet system in this part of Africa, to identify the interrelations and compromises which it has developed vis-à-vis other, pre-existing forms of divination locally, specifically the nutshell oracle, the astragali oracle, catoptromancy ('water-gazing'), and forms of trance divination without material apparatus. What we see is the apparently rather sudden appearance of the four-tablet system in the highlands of Zimbabwe — in a form also attested for an adjacent region closer to the Swahili coast, among the Konde of Tanzania and Mozambique — in the middle of the second millennium A.D., followed by a slow and limited expansion over the next few centuries. From the nineteenth century and particularly the twentieth century, then, this spread intensifies so that by the end of the twentieth century (despite, or because of, strong opposition from colonial governments, who saw the four-tablet system as related to — the selection of victims for — human sacrifice) the system turns out to have successfully entered all therapeutic and religious systems in the sub-continent and has become virtually the hallmark of non-cosmopolitan healers whatever their specific discipline. Such a spread has to be accounted for by reference to fundamental structural principles both of the four-tablet system and its rivals, and of the (globalizing!) socio-cultural systems of Southern Africa among which it spread.

While this serves to dynamize a comparative ethnographic mapping, within a still limited part of Africa, into a historical process, it does not solve the problem of origin.

That these two problems are not unrelated becomes clear when we realize that divination systems which have the same formal mathematical properties (all based on 2^n distinct configurations as produced by plain combinatorial mathematics) but which are — on the surface — very different in material apparatus (relying on the reduction of four random series of indentures in the sand, of pebbles, grains etc. to two values: even or uneven), are found both on the Indian Ocean (Madagascar, Comores Islands, Swahili Coast) and throughout West-Africa (where the most famous variants are known as Fa and Ifa); from West Africa they spread to the New World with the slave trade. Following earlier hints by de Flacourt, Burton and others, the orientalist Becker recognized, as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, that these West and East African systems all have a common root in Arabian geomancy (*xaṭṭ*, also called *xaṭṭ al-raml* — 'sand calligraphy' — in order to distinguish it from calligraphy in general which is significantly designated by the same term). *Xaṭṭ* was a dominant form of divination in the North African Arabian high culture of the Middle Ages, when it received ample scholarly treatment by the great historian Ibn Xaldūn. He presents *xaṭṭ* as

essentially a poor man's astrology, in the hands of those who no longer had the mathematical skill nor the reference tables to perform the complex astronomical calculations which astrology has required ever since its formalization by Greek Hellenistic scholars as a personalized divination method. It is now fairly clear how, rapidly adulterating and localizing, and often shedding much of its conscious astrological referents, forms of *xaʔʔ* have spread over West and East Africa in the hands of literate Muslims and their associates engaged in trade and diplomacy. What scholarship has so far not realized is that the spread of *xaʔʔ* extended as far south as the Zimbabwe highlands and even, in the centuries after 1500 and in an entirely Africanized form which so far effectively concealed its Arabian inspiration, all the way south down to the Cape. I have found conclusive evidence for this not only in the mathematical properties of the four-tablet system (which could still be based on parallel invention of universally applicable mathematical properties), but particularly in the interpretation catalogues which, although illiterate, still retain (with a precision which is beyond all statistical chance) the specific features of the East African/Indian Ocean, patently Arabian-derived variants of *xaʔʔ*.

While this serves to push back to the beginning of the second millennium A.D. the historical horizon of the four-tablet interpretational catalogue, at least three major questions remain:

- the origin of North African *xaʔʔ*
- the conversion of Arabian *xaʔʔ*, very probably via its East African/Indian Ocean derivatives, to a *four-tablet form* not found in the general *xaʔʔ* realm outside Southern Africa
- the accommodation for the four-tablet form to other, presumably pre-existing, rival divination apparatuses in Southern Africa, particularly the nutshell oracle, the astragali oracle, and forms of catoptromancy.

I am rather confident that (partly on the basis of the pioneering, but a-historical iconographic analysis of Nettleton) a painstaking rethinking of the material features of the apparatus involved will throw more light on the latter two questions. For this purpose we shall systematically look at the tablet form as a particular variant of cleromancy, which scholarship in other parts of the Old World has connected with belomancy — divination through arrows — and rhabdomancy — divination through sticks — which have parallels in the rival divination systems in Southern Africa; at the more specific iconographic features of the tablets (their square or triangular shape, their tendency — suggestive of a former function or symbolism now obsolete — of being pierced by a single hole even when they are not threaded onto a string); the various markings on the tablets, which form a limited and fairly well defined series with systematic cultural interpretations; at the stylistic conventions of wood (/bone/ivory) carving involved); and finally at the associated symbolic interpretations in the various local contexts.

3.4. *Beyond Africa*

Pursuing the first remaining question, that of the origin of North African *xaʔʔ*, means definitely stepping outside the realm of Africanist anthropology. However, the decision not to stop here but to continue our journey of exploration is prompted both by the relative accessibility of the Arabian material for someone like me whose first extensive research was on North African popular Islam, and by the excitement of doing what could be termed 'globalizing cultural history'. Moreover there is a

genuine hiatus in scholarship in this point: despite earlier work by Tannery, Delatte, Thorndike, Fahd etc., no coherent or convincing historical study of the origin of Arabian geomancy exists. This is all the more remarkable and regrettable, since this divination technique spread not only all over Africa and the Indian Ocean Coast, and from West Africa to the New World, but it was also introduced, by twelfth-century A.D. Greek and Latin translations, from the Arab world to South and Western Europe, where (in the hands of such major esoteric scholars as Agrippa and Fludd) it became a major divination technique in the Renaissance, subsequently to be routinized and popularized, so as to end up within the reach of people from all walks of European life in the eighteenth and nineteenth century; recently European geomancy is going through a revival in New Age circles.

Concerning the early history of *xaṭṭ* there is much unravelling of intertwined strands to do, and other scholars — in full command of the various relevant non-European languages and with knowledge of the relevant historical sources — would be far better equipped than I am, as an Africanist, to undertake this analysis. This part of the book therefore can only be tentative, an exhortation to further research by proper experts — who have so far failed to address the topic despite its obvious importance.

If *xaṭṭ*, as practiced by such scholars as the fourteenth century A.D. Berber *eaḡx al-Zanāt*, appeared to Ibn Xald'n as a poor men's astrology, this means that we have to trace the (reasonably well documented) history of astrology as well as the (far more obscure) earlier references to non-astrological 'writing in the sand' from which *xaṭṭ al-raml* derives its name and original randomizing procedures. The quest will take us, from the heyday of classic Arabian culture, and via such well-known centres of scholarly exchange as Alexandria (mediating between Egyptian, Hebrew and Greek scholarship) and Óarrân in western Mesopotamia (mediating between Assyrian, Greek and Arabian scholarship), at least one millennium further back. So far my library research has of course largely concentrated on the African comparative material, and, while looking at selected accounts of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan, Roman, Hellenistic and early Christian magic and divination, I have not yet found any specific and unmistakable evidence of *xaṭṭ*-related forms of divination older than those identified by Fahd. However, it is clear that, both as a form of astrology and in its own right, *xaṭṭ* draws on an inspiration which for many hundreds of years was widely available on the shores of the Mediterranean and in the Near East, and of which, for instance, Pythagorean number symbolism (which directly fed into the 'theory of aspects' of Greek astrology, but in itself is likely to have been a development of much older Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Indian and northern Indo-European — 'Hyperborean' — themes), and astrological elements in the Corpus Hermeticum, were Hellenic and mid-Hellenistic variants. It is hoped of course that working, in the proposed NIAS format — in an environment of specialists on ancient Middle Eastern religious and divinatory systems will facilitate my further search. As attested in several ancient sources, writing in sand (directly on the ground, or encased in a flat box — a likely prototype for the divination boards still used in West African geomancy) was widely practiced especially for draft mathematical calculations, so the reference to sand need not originally refer (as suggested by some Arabian sources) to a peripheral desert milieu outside the well-documented mainstream of intellectual civilization.

Some of mankind's oldest written documents relating to divination derive from Mesopotamia — so much so that Assyriology, as a discipline, is perhaps more knowledgeable about divination than any other field of scholarship; and any quest for

the origin of *xa††* must necessarily touch there. Yet there is no reason yet to assume that the oldest forms of geomancy were Mesopotamian. In fact, a prominent Assyriologist like Oppenheim sees the Asian continent as the scene for a contiguous series of typologically and presumably also generically related divination systems including those of ancient Mesopotamia, implying no general emanation from the latter. In the same vein Hébert, one of the most perceptive students of *xa††*-derived geomancy in Africa, has pointed out the amazingly close parallels between *xa††* (which produces, as basic configurations for interpretation, tetragrams of four lines, each line consisting of one or two dots; e.g. .1, 2, 3, 4) and the classic *I Ching* — not only a New Age pastime but genuinely the conceptual expression of the Chinese world-view underlying all Chinese divination, and much of the other sciences and arts in ancient China —, which produces hexagrams of six lines, each line consisting of one line which may be broken or unbroken, e.g. p, a, R, ` . Scapulomancy with sheep's shoulder-blades is likewise widespread in ancient Asia and in Mediterranean Antiquity; a specific form when the bone pierced by a red-hot poker so as to produce an interpretable effect of craquelation is the oldest Chinese form of divination, attested so abundantly that such bones, with the diviners' interpretation inscribed on them, now constitute the main sources for the oldest Chinese history. To judge by the various Arabic references to the Prophet Idr'iss (equalled with the biblical Enoch, or more likely with Andreas, Alexander the Great's legendary cook) and to Tumtum al-Hindi (a legendary Central Asian scholar), as early figures in the history of *xa††*, a likely region of origin for *xa††* would be Parthia/Persia in the early Hellenistic period. There we are already fairly deeply inside Asia, at a point in time when the *I Ching* corpus had been in existence for many centuries, and communications both over land and over sea between China and the Middle East were sufficiently open so as to ensure a steady supply of silk on the Mediterranean shores. It would be unwise however to relegate any (as yet hypothetical) prototypical *xa††* in Persia to a Chinese model. It is far more likely that what we have here is an underlying prototype of divination based on a fairly simple, and persistent, cleromantic manipulatory technique of producing 2ⁿ configurations, — a prototype that would have been essentially Central or Northern Asian and which from there would have ramified both to China and to the Middle East — and so on to North Africa.

This as yet entirely hypothetical process would be so strongly reminiscent of that postulated (or more than that) by modern scholarship (see Ginzburg and references cited there) for the spread of *shamanism* through Asia and Europe from a hypothetical northeast Asian source, that one has to wonder if perhaps shamanism and specific forms of cleromancy are not intimately related from their very origin. Of course, if Ginzburg's essentially (but convincingly) diffusionist argument can be supported and if it can be extended to the African continent — my earlier work on Tunisia and Zambia contains some of the elements necessary for such an extension —, then shamanism and *xa††*-derived divination could be said to have at least *ended up* as being (again?) intimately related in Southern Africa, where four-tablet divination is now practiced, among other situations, in ecstatic cults some of which have a tradition of earlier exclusive reliance on trance divination., i.e. without tablets or other physical apparatus. Shamanism, however, has become so much of a blanket term that it remains a point for further analysis to what extent it refers to one coherent and clearly defined set of practices even in the northeastern Asian context.

It is not only *xa††* which needs to be problematized, situated in time and place, and understood in its potential for truly phenomenal spread, but also the more specifically cleromantic properties of the four-tablet oracle, which (by contrast to the

interpretational catalogue) seem not in themselves *xatf*-derived, or only very indirectly so. The roughly rectangular or triangular tablet form with markings, even in a specifically pierced form, has a wide distribution all over the world, in divinatory contexts but particularly outside such contexts. Whereas it is useful to look at the extensive available data for inspiration, in an attempt to construct the kind of typological classifications upon which all further comparison and theorizing ought to be based (here archaeology provides not only much of the data but also a sound method), it is unlikely that inspection of this material will lead to anything definitive. My personal intuition is that tablets of this kind, with a more or less standardized form apparently carrying a more or less standardized information, are suggestive of a situation of literacy and a certain degree of political or cultic centralization; they remind us for instance of Egyptian, Greek and Roman writing tablets — one of the prototypes of the modern book. In other words, the tablet form might be said to be somewhat out of place in the pre-colonial Southern and South Central African context, unless as an emulation of something imported from far away, and subsequently transformed — with virtual loss of a more original function — so as to suit a local purpose. This hypothesis of course has to be confronted with conflicting evidence — for the tablet form is certainly attested also in non-literate or proto-literate situations the world over. Given the wide distribution of the (pierced) tablet form before 1500 AD outside South Central and Southern Africa, but its apparent absence in the latter area, one would presume that not only the interpretational catalogue but also the tablet form were external imports, although not necessarily imported at the same time and via the same route as the catalogue; perhaps the iconography and woodcarving conventions, when assessed within the total Indian Ocean space (which via Madagascar would reach all the way to Indonesia, with intermediate stops at South Arabia, Persia and Sri Lanka) might provide further clues here.

While the tablet form is fairly common, ethnographically or historically documented cases of *cleromancy with marked tablets*, of the type practiced in Southern Africa, are remarkably few and far between. Cases from the Old World which have so far come to my attention derive from Greek (e.g. the Herakles shrine at Bura) and Latin (Praeneste) Antiquity, Celts and Germans. If these may be said to represent an underlying Indo-European cultural pattern (but this immediately forces us to explain why, within the Indo-European realm, it was not far more common), it may well be the same as that which we are beginning to discern with regard to the (presumably equally Indo-European) Persian traces of early geomancy; then the *I Ching* connection may fall in its presumably proper place as another aspect of East and Central Asian continuities and exchanges involving, among other groups, Indo-Europeans, — a model now rather convincingly argued for shamanism with which cleromancy appears to be connected in various specific instances of its distribution in space and time.

Obviously, an enormous historical, archaeological and ethnographical literature on Eurasia remains to be explored in this light, and the bulk of this exploration would necessarily fall outside the scope of the present book, to be left to other scholars. While it is hoped that we shall be able to discern historical patterns suggestive of a convergence that is more specific than just a series of parallel inventions, there is no telling what further research along these lines will bring up. In the most ideal case I may end up in a position of being able to argue a specific provenance for the tablet as appearing in South Central Africa c. 1500 AD; more likely it will prove to be

impossible to proceed beyond the a-historical typological phase of analysis on this point.

There is a close association between the four-tablet oracle in South Central Africa, and the Mwali cult. The latter's symbolism, including long black garments, ceremonial staves, specific gestures of respect, lunar calendar, the production of divinatory voices from hidden caves etc. might also betray imports from far away — an enormously politicized bone of contention when applied to the state systems with which the Mwali cult has been associated, and with that state's archaeological remains in the form of Great Zimbabwe. Whatever intercontinental connexions may have been suggested with regard to these ruins ever since they were discovered for Western scholarship in the late nineteenth century, these have now been effectively dismissed as colonial slander. Scholarly orthodoxy now in the name of African cultural initiative and creativity proclaims a degree of pure-bred Africanness for these ruins which far exceeds the degree of Americanness, or Dutchness, which North American apple-pie or Dutch windmills (both known and admitted to have intercontinental historical roots) could ever attain... Very senior Mwali cult personnel volunteered to me their conviction that the cult has an Egyptian origin, and while in this sophisticated cultic environment such a statement may very well be a typical example of oral-historical recycling of nineteenth century theosophy or early-twentieth-century diffusionism, it is not impossible that the present project may shed further light on the origin and history of the Mwali cult itself.

Meanwhile, does the emerging argument not merely confirm the image of African societies as passive recipients of cultural material originating and brought to maturity elsewhere? To the extent to which the argument is based on empirical evidence, there would be no reason to alter it merely for the sake of public relations. However, despite the Arabian (which in this case mainly means: North *African*) focus in the diffusion of *xa††*, and whatever may turn out the most likely historical background of the tablet form as now encountered in Southern Africa, it is clear that for half a millenium or more *xa††*-inspired divination has formed a context of intensive African cultural development, where the imported cultural material was greatly transformed, and saturated with cultural notions percolating in local African cultures. The reception and subsequent localization of Christianity in Northern and Eastern Europe, over a period not much exceeding one millennium now, is a comparable phenomenon which however was never, to my knowledge, cited as a reason for chiding Europeans as culturally incompetent or lacking in originality. But further research within this project may yet reveal that Africa played a more active and original role in the history of divination. The Mesopotamian connexion may ultimately be taken to suggest links with Central and East Asia, but it also suggests similar links with the Semitic-speaking peoples of the Near East and of North East Africa (Ethiopia), which are claimed on linguistic and cultural grounds to have remote continuities with pre- and proto-historic Egyptians, Libyans, Berbers and West Atlantic groups in West-Africa. If geomancy made its first public appearance on the scene of history in North Africa, and if the number symbolism which it enshrines may at least partly derive, via Alexandrian Hermetism, from ancient Egyptian roots, it becomes possible that the massive reception of *xa††* throughout the African continent in the course of the second millennium A.D. proceeded so easily merely because it was basically a systematic reformulation of a familiar, African, mode of divination in the first place... In that case the importance of the (as yet hypothetical) Persian connexion of *xa††* would have to be seen in a more relative light. For this part of the argument we have to carefully assess *all* evidence on cleromancy throughout Africa, and not only in South and South

Central Africa. The apparent passivity of Africa may be an analytical artefact produced by the specific nature of the sources: when historiography has a bias in favour of documentary evidence (as contrasted with oral history, archaeology, linguistic and cultural patterns of distribution etc.), then a largely illiterate continent is bound to be mainly represented, and in an unfavourable light, through the eyes of other continents. Archaeological and ethnographic evidence may yet contain surprises as to the Africa's place in the history of divination.

3.5. Divination as history and as science

The advantage of material objects, such as a divination apparatus, is that they have a traceable distribution in space and time, which lends itself to scholarly analysis even without full knowledge of the conceptual and practical local contexts within these objects functioned. However, the argument must not be reduced to one about material shapes, ornaments, and routes of diffusion and cultural influence. Its purpose is twofold: to understand the four-tablet system better by situating it in its proper, extensive dimensions of space and time; and to advocate, by doing so, a new type of Africanist discourse. However, the argument can only be properly concluded if the lessons of time and space are explicitly applied to a better reading of the oracle, identifying more clearly what divination is all about, and why it represents such a persistent and central human concern that its form, with major yet detectable transformation, can bridge space and time to such amazing extent. The Assyriologist Bottéro has written a number of perceptive analyses of divination, whose relevance extend far beyond his own discipline in that they stress the unique status of divination as a proto-scientific classification system — as a coherent and empirically-orientated statement on the nature of the universe. A return to the four-tablets oracle in action in the Southern African context, after we have concluded our exploration, is to highlight divination as a unique intermeshing of the historically and culturally specific, with the universal of the human condition. But obviously, it is rather too early to spell out the conclusions of a book the research for which is not yet completed.

4. Preparation so far

Data were collected in Southern Africa since 1988, and the analysis has been in full swing since 1990. Parts of the argument (particularly those relating to 3.1 and 3.3 above) were presented in provisional form before national and international forums since that year. A bibliography of close to 2000 titles was drawn up, and an estimated 40% of these items has already been perused. The specifically Africanist items have been fairly completely traced in libraries in the Netherlands and Belgium, and funds have been made available by the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for their being photocopied. Given this preparation, the package of facilities habitually extended to fellows at NIAS, and the stimulating influence from a team of specialists working on the religion of the ancient Near East, the book can be completed during one year of full time work, i.e. under exemption from commitments in administration or teaching.

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