

***Sangoma* in the North Atlantic region**

On integrity in intercultural mediation

6.1. Introduction

The first version of this chapter was originally written for the Festschrift presented to Matthew Schoffeleers on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. A few lines on the life and work of that prominent student of African religion are in order, so as to set the framework of my argument on the practice of *sangomahood* in the North Atlantic region.

Matthew Schoffeleers was born in 1928 in the southern part of the Netherlands. Initially he became a Roman Catholic priest and missionary, following the obvious channel of self-realisation and upward social mobility available in that generation, social class and region. In his missionary work in the Lower Shire valley, Malawi, Southern Africa, he identified to a great extent with the local population and their religion. He was initiated into the Mbona cult – a cult of the fertility of the land. He was also initiated into the notorious *nyau* mask society; he only truly realised what he had landed into when at the night before his initiation he was shown a human skull that was dug up from under the floor on which he slept – presumably of a sacrificial victim. His dedication to local religion earned Father Schoffeleers serious reprimands from the Roman Catholic hierarchy. He was to exchange his missionary work for a study in cultural anthropology at Oxford – although he never gave up his priesthood and remained active in Malawi, finally as a senior lecturer in African history and anthropology at the University of Malawi. In 1976 he came to the Netherlands as Reader in non-Western religious anthropology at the Free University, Amsterdam. Here the first doctorate to be supervised by him was defended in 1979, that of Wim van Binsbergen. In 1980 Schoffeleers' readership was converted into a full professorship, which by the late 1980s he exchanged for a special chair in the University of Utrecht. He retired in the early 1990s.

At least three main lines I can see in the life and work of Matthew Schoffeleers:

- (1) The struggle to be allowed to approach an African culture with a total commitment, on the conditions proper to that culture, regardless of the preconceived, externally imposed images and stipulations which attended such an approach in Schoffeleers' society of origin: the Netherlands, the academic subculture, the world of mission and church.
- (2) Yet when Schoffeleers subsequently produces an image of that distant culture, he does not wish to dissimulate his attachments to his society of origin; on the contrary, he claims the right to present the African culture, and to interpret it, in the light of dilemmas informed by his own social, academic and religious experience – for (apart from a few personal touches) he has committed himself totally, not only to the distant African culture, but also to the North Atlantic academic and ecclesiastical context.
- (3) Since the preceding points result in a struggle between two total commitments unified in one and the same person, it is inevitable that such a person emerges from the struggle in a damaged and maimed condition; but nothing is of greater value than that struggle, and the severest disfigurement is the price that has to be paid for the greatest election.

I first met Matthew in 1972, at Terence Ranger's epoch-making Lusaka conference on the history of Central African religious systems, which for me would mean the breakthrough to an international career in this field of studies, as a similar conference a few years earlier had been for Matthew himself. At the time, Matthew found himself somewhere between points (1) and (2) as listed above. He had already been damaged by the confrontations with his ecclesiastical superiors, as a result of the lack of respect for externally imposed boundaries, with which he, as a missionary, had approached the Mang'anja culture of southern Malawi. He had already made the transition from missionary to anthropologist at the University of Malawi; he would remain a priest and a member of a religious order. But perhaps because he was afraid of what point (3) would hold in store for him, for the time being he was, in the early 1970s, channelling his great knowledge and love of the Mang'anja culture into a form of research his religious superiors would have no quarrel with: the remote history of the Mbona cult. In a distant past, nearly half a millennium behind us, the founder of that cult, Mbona, appears to have been the martyr of a process of state formation that, among other factors, was due to the earliest European expansion in this region¹ – much in the way that Christ could be said to have been a martyr of Roman expansion in Palestine. But if this preoccupation with the distant past might have been a way of buying time for Matthew Schoffeleers, it proved impossible to close the road to his personal here and now. For years it would be him, of all people, who was the driving force keeping the Mbona cult alive. His work on African theology, African Christology, on Christ as

¹ Schoffeleers 1972a, 1972b, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1985, 1992.

an African diviner-priest (*nganga*),¹ merged seamlessly with the pastoral work he conducted in Malawi and the Netherlands for many years, and all these are aspects of the way in which he discharged point (2). As he pronounced during the final blessing in the marriage ceremony that he celebrated for my wife and me (in Belgium, typically way outside the geographical area of his ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and with creative, African-inspired contributions from all three of us):

‘It is my mission to make my God visible, wherever, and under whatever form he is permitted to manifest himself’.

Only those who have been close to Schoffeleers have been privileged to see a glimpse of point (3) at painful moments when his struggle, although directed at distant contexts, temporarily invaded personal relationships only to leave them purified and enriched, after a crisis. To a wider audience, and well under control, this aspect manifested itself in the disquieting synthesis of structuralist anthropology, theory and African religious anthropology that was to constitute his second, Utrecht, inaugural address (1991).² The maimed figure par excellence, *Luwe* who has only one side to his body, and who hops pathetically through the Central African forest as well as through the dreams of its inhabitants, is not only the archetypal androgyne separated from his counterpart and struggling to be reunited,³ but (as Schoffeleers succeeded in demonstrating with great homiletic and structuralist spirit) he is also Christ, Mbona, and in the final analysis, more than anyone else, Schoffeleers himself.

As an archetype of disfigurement and asymmetry, in my world-wide analysis of leopard-skin symbolism *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots* an important place is reserved for the immensely archaic concept of *Luwe*, the half-being who has only a left or a right side to his body. Von Sicard, who devoted an exhaustive comparative study to this character, has demonstrated it to be an ancient hunting/weather/herding/blacksmithing god known over much of the African continent and adjacent parts of the Old World.⁴ The Nkoya people of Zambia, who despite their agricultural skills primarily identify as hunters, know him as *Mwendanjangula*: ‘Tree-top Walker’. A hunter on his solitary journey through the deep and dense savannah forest may meet him, and if he is the first to greet, may receive great material and healing powers, but if *Mwendanjangula* greets the hunter first, then the latter may be stricken with madness. For the Nkoya today, *Mwendanjangula* is an old and obsolete god, who in his qualities as Master of Animals and Lord of the Forest is often implicitly distinguished from the creator god *Nyambe* (originally a West African spider-god) who yet could count⁵ as another manifestation of *Luwe*.

¹ E.g.: Schoffeleers 1988, 1991b.

² Schoffeleers 1991a.

³ Plato, *Symposium*, Aristophanes's speech (Plato 1921).

⁴ Von Sicard 1968-1969; cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

⁵ Von Sicard 1968-1969: 704.

Perhaps, in the last instance, the disfigurement that renders a person godlike boils down to death as a condition for resurrection or rebirth; but this disfigurement is certainly the price that is to be paid for a total commitment to two domains. The tragic thing is that only through this very commitment are these domains (like life and death themselves!) constructed to be irreconcilably opposed to one another. It takes violence – physical or conceptual or both – to create and maintain effective boundaries.

This indicates the central tragedy of the classic anthropologist, the one who in the course of years of intensive fieldwork acquires the language and the customs so as to be able to understand and describe another culture as if from the inside. According to a sixteenth-century CE source¹ there was, among the possessions of the Viking king Svyatoslav in ninth-century Kiev (south-western Russia), a drinking vessel made from a human skull mounted in gold; it bore an inscription:

‘In search of the exotic he lost what was more his own than anything else’

– his skull, and hence his life. This is a lesson that eminently applies to classic anthropologists. Their fieldwork commitment means that they die, at least figuratively, in their own original culture, in order that they may live in their adopted host culture; but can they still go back home? The idea of ‘dying in order to live’, while having acquired Orphic, Dionysian and subsequently Christian overtones, goes back at least to the agrarian cults of Osiris and of Dumuzi in the Ancient Near East as attested from the late third millennium BCE.² We are also reminded of Victor Turner, one of the greatest anthropologists of the twentieth century, who towards the end of his life contemplated the idea of the ‘*thrice-born anthropologist*’: originally born in her own culture, then reborn into a different culture through fieldwork, and finally taking the lessons learned in that other culture back home for a renewed insight, a third birth, in her culture of origin.³ In the South Asian religious tradition, it is having completed a major sacrifice that causes a person to be considered at least *twice-born*.

And once more a simple local example, like Svyatoslav’s drinking-vessel in Kiev, triggers the thought of long-range continuities in time and space – as leading theme in this chapter and the two that are to follow. Use of the occiput (upper part of the skull) of a slain enemy as a drinking vessel has a long history in southern Russia and was first attested for the Scyths there, one and a half millennium before Svyatoslav.⁴ Livy⁵ mentions how the Gallii Cisalpinenses, in what is today northern

¹ Schreiber n.d.

² On Dumuzi (Tammuz, Adonis), cf. Frazer 1914; Jacobsen 1970; Scurlock 1992. On the Osiris cult: Barta 1978; Bianchi 1971; Bonnet 1971; Budge 1973; Cooke 1931; Griffiths 1980, 1982; Helck 1962; Hopfner 1940; Otto 1966; Scharff 1948.

³ V.W. Turner, personal communication, 20 September, 1979.

⁴ Herodotus, *Historiae*, IV: 65.

⁵ Livy 23: 24.

Italy, poured libations from the skull of a defeated Roman general. The custom might have truly great antiquity here, for Sergi and Blanc claim to have found evidence of drinking from a human skull in the Grotta Guattari, from Mousterian, i.e. Late Neanderthal times.¹ As one of many bits of fragmented evidence suggesting transcontinental continuities between sub-Saharan Africa and the Caucasian region,² the same practice is recorded for the Nkoya people of Zambia in the late nineteenth century CE.³

No two persons' situations and life stories are wholly identical. My argument in the present chapter shows the considerable extent to which the three main lines of Matthew Schoffeleers' life as a scholar may also be detected in my own. Yet the unwinding of my own biography was, for most of the time, so much out of phase with Schoffeleers' development that often I had the greatest difficulty with precisely those of his texts (written after 1980) in which his scholarship more and more opted for theological expressions – and in which he emphatically identified not only as an excellent Western intellectual investigator of the Mang'anja but also as a Western priest. After all, he is my senior by nineteen years, and although the Roman Catholic church did play a major role also in my youth as a source of secondary education and of ritual, my only office ever within that organisation was as a choirboy between the ages ten and twelve. Until the end of the 1980s I kept hoping that my scientific approach to African religion⁴ would form an effective secular canalisation of my own religious sensibility such as I had acquired in childhood. Quite early I had detached myself from the Roman Catholic church. If I came to anthropology from an unhappy childhood, it was not because of interference from any religious body, but because of the kinship dramas dominating the family in which I grew up, shortly after World War II: dramas around incest, violence, despair; neither of my parents had ever set eyes upon their fathers. For me, Africa was at first an arbitrary professional choice of a regional specialism (my first wife had worked there and wanted to return), but very soon it became a refuge, where I kept looking for a home. I believed I found just that, first (from 1972) among the Zambian Nkoya, where I advanced to the status of adopted member of the royal family inheriting, at the death of King Kabambi Kahare in 1993, his royal bow and 25 km² of land (of which however I never took effective possession); and later (from 1989) in Botswana, in booming Francistown, where (often regarding myself as a Nkoya migrant labourer from Zambia) I found a place for myself in one of the few 'lodges' devoted to therapeutic ecstatic religion, only to leave that lodge again as a fully initiated and

¹ Holleman 1998: 64.

² Such conditions were already spotted by Baumann 1938: 239 – cf. von Sicard 1968-1969: 686; also, cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

³ Sampson 1972; Tabler 1963.

⁴ Cf. van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985a.

certified diviner-priest (*sangoma*).¹ After my clever Marxist-reductionist historical and political analyses of African religion in the 1970s and 1980s (which largely amounted to a discursive deconstruction in *etic* terms), becoming a *sangoma* meant that my existence was effectively captured and restructured by African religion.

Meanwhile it is now more than ten years later. I have remained a *sangoma*, in addition to my other central roles as husband, father, researcher, professor, manager, and poet. During my many visits to Southern Africa I occasionally have practiced as a diviner-priest, but I have mainly reserved such activities to the Netherlands, where I reside permanently, and from where, for the past few years, I have also attended to my Internet clients seeking *sangoma* consultations. What is the meaning of such intercultural mediation, and what questions does it raise concerning integrity? Is it possible, after Matthew Schoffeleers' example, to embrace two conflicting total commitments in two different cultural orientations, and yet preserve one's integrity? This is what I intend to explore in this chapter.

6.2. Integrity

We may define 'integrity' as: a person's successful endeavour to create and maintain consistency between his behaviour, on the one hand, and the norms and values to which he is publicly committed, on the other. In present-day North Atlantic culture, integrity in itself has become one of the more important norms and values, regardless of what specific norms, values and behaviour are being pursued with integrity. Is this insistence on integrity a trap, or an achievement, of North Atlantic culture, or both? Suffice it to say that the model underlying this widely held conception of integrity is that of the unified, integrated, consistent, conscious human subject – the subject that is like, and can be read as, a *book*² – which post-structuralism (Derrida, Foucault) has argued to be one of modernity's central, but obsolete, myths.

As a philosophical concept, integrity is little elaborated upon. It does not feature in the main edifices of ethical thought that have been developed in the Western tradition since Antiquity. Yet the idea of integrity is akin to that underlying Aristotle's *virtue ethics*,³ where the vicious act is that which is out of character for the person committing that act, regardless of what that act consists of. Perhaps the peripheral nature of the concept of integrity to the philosophy of ethics may be attributable to the fact that virtue ethics, a common approach up to Aquinas, has long been supplanted by approaches that have a causal rather than a teleological orientation.

But if integrity is not currently a thriving philosophical concept, it is at least a standard value in contemporary global society.

¹ Van Binsbergen 1990b; chapter 5 of the present book; van der Velde 1997.

² The *book* as a paradigm of North Atlantic conceptions of knowledge and identity is a recurrent theme in the present... book; cf. especially chapter 13.

³ Garcia 1999.

Integrity is a value we share with many others, for example with the members of our generation, with fellow academics, with fellow nationals (if we happen to be Dutch, or middle-class USA citizens; not all nations put an equal premium on integrity), with the citizens of the globalised middle-class international society. As such, integrity is intersubjective and constitutes a fairly unambiguous touchstone. At the same time, however, integrity is an individual striving for self-realisation, and in that respect its intersubjectivity is inevitably limited. We do not know whether the norms and values that a person overtly articulates are also truly cherished by that person in his innermost self. In assessing his integrity we take the liberty of scrutinising not just those of his manifestations as are expressly produced for public consumption, but also his secrets, his slips of the tongue, and other unintended manifestations that may be taken to reveal his innermost thoughts and motives. His public claim may be mere lip-service, intended to create the necessary room for tacitly acting according to other norms and other values that to him are even more fundamental. The point is that these norms and values must be *intersubjective* – shared with others. Total idiosyncrasy or total absorption in the pursuit of personal power and gratification may be very true to a character, but can never be taken as signs of integrity. To the extent to which a person's publicly expressed norms and values may fail to account entirely for his public behaviour (not everyone is a gifted actor and anyway much of a person's behaviour is determined by subconscious drives installed within his individual personality, and by social-structural arrangements that remain below the threshold of personal consciousness), to that extent such a person may leave an impression of defective integrity. It is even possible that this person does not entirely reject but in fact partially subscribes to the values that he publicly represents, even though these differ from the ones he cherishes in his innermost self; his integrity would then for instance be manifest from the extent to which he sincerely and profoundly struggles with the problem that two contradictory norms may both appear to him as valid at the same time. But it is also possible to take a more performative view of the matter and to let the central test of integrity reside, by definition, not in the inner struggle but in the successful public mediation of consistency.

So far we have confined our discussion to the North Atlantic society (specifically the Dutch regional variant), against the background of a shared cultural framework: that of the Dutch or, for that matter, the European or North Atlantic intelligentsia. In the intercultural mediation that the anthropologist seeks to bring about, the problem of integrity takes a rather different shape. *How is it possible to realise integrity in a situation of interculturality that by definition involves two rather independent sets of norms and values, both of which apply simultaneously?* This corresponds with the points (1) and (2) as discussed above with reference to Matthew Schoffeleers: once more a struggle from which one only emerges with disfigurement (3), but hopefully while acquiring a new dignity in the process.

My claim to have become a *sangoma*, to have built that capacity into my very life, and to justifiably build a therapeutic practice around that capacity, essentially

amounts to the following. I claim that, in addition to my activities as a Dutch intellectual, I operate simultaneously, effectively and justifiably in a totally different local cultural context, that of Southern African *sangomahood*. In that latter context our concept of integrity would doubtlessly acquire a totally different meaning – if it would fit that context at all. Integrity is perhaps a universal value of global culture, but there is no evident answer to the question of what integrity might mean with regard to specific and concrete local contexts in the South, and with regard to the mediation between those contexts and North Atlantic society.

In this dilemma only an examination of the concrete features of *sangomahood* will take us further.

6.3. *Sangomas* in Francistown, Botswana

In and around the town of Francistown, which is situated at an hour's drive from the border between Botswana and Zimbabwe, *sangomas* are people who consider themselves, and who are considered by their extended social environment, as effective healers: as mediators between living people, on the one hand, and the ancestors, spirits and God (Mwali) on the other – in a general context where most bodily afflictions and other misfortunes of a psychological, social and economic nature, are interpreted in religious terms.

These specialists believe that they have acquired their powers of mediation and healing by virtue of a special supernatural election, which made them into incarnations of ancestral spirits. Senior *sangomas* engage each other in a constant battle on life and death over prestige, hierarchy, and control over adepts. Such forms of their institutionalised behaviour as are open to concrete religious anthropological research (diagnosis, therapy, training, initiation, graduation) are considered, by these specialists and their social environment, as mere secondary aspects – as progressive manifestation and confirmation – of something that is not open to objective assessment in terms of North Atlantic sciences: their fundamental ancestral dispensation. This is considered to reveal itself when (what is locally interpreted as) an ancestral spirit, during a public trance, speaks through the mouth of the medium, making coherent and understandable pronouncements in a language that has local currency.

Around 1990 Francistown boasted a handful of *sangoma* lodges, three of which I got to know well through intensive contact and personal membership. Out of a total population of some 60,000, the town possessed certainly no more than fifty *sangomas* and *twazas* (trainee-*sangomas*), about half of whom I knew personally, and a quarter of whom were my day-to-day social contacts whenever I was in Francistown. So we are dealing here with a speciality that only very few people engage in: less than one in a thousand of the urban population. By way of comparison: in the countryside of north-western Tunisia, where in 1968 I did fieldwork on ecstatic religion, more than a quarter of all adult men were adepts (*faqīr*, plural *fūqra*) of the superficially Islamised ecstatic cult, which coincided with

the brotherhoods of the Qadīriya and Rahmāniya; of these a small minority (the cultic personnel with the rank of *shāwush*) were effectively spirit mediums in that they produced articulated messages when in trance.¹ Likewise, in the countryside of western central Zambia, where I studied cults of affliction in the early 1970s, ten to twenty per cent of the adult women were adepts, but only the female leaders (at most one-tenth of the number of adepts) could effectively be called spirit mediums.

Many clients pass through the hands of the *sangomas*. In most cases the treatment is limited to one or two divination sessions, a few directions as to how to conduct an ancestral sacrifice, and the administration of herbal medicine which is derived directly from nature or from fellow-practitioners. Only a small proportion of the clients makes the grade to *twazahood* – via a public first initiation, when the candidate receives his (more typically her) specific paraphernalia and ritual uniform, but not before mediumistic trance has provided the culturally prescribed proof of ancestral election. The *twaza* novice is subjected to all sorts of servility, and to taboos in the nutritional and sexual domain. Far fewer than half of the *twazas* conclude this incubation period, after at least a year, with the final graduation to *sangoma*. Such a graduation includes: additional tests and rituals; a great and expensive ancestral sacrifice; a public and festive installation during a nocturnal dancing ritual involving the participation of ideally all the *sangomas* (they may number several dozens) who graduated earlier from the same lodge; and payment of the considerable tuition fee that had been agreed on at the outset of *twazahood*. The graduation is concluded when the new graduate is confirmed in his high status by being received within the regional shrine of the High God cult, where again additional paraphernalia and therapeutic dispensations are extended to him against additional payments.

Manifestly a number of different levels of cult organisation may be distinguished:

- the lodge, under the direction of an independent *sangoma*, with her (or his) close kinsmen and *twazas* as co-residing members;
- around the lodge a wider congregation of non-residing kinsmen, of *twazas*, and of independent *sangomas* who have graduated from that lodge;
- the regional division of the cult of the High God Mwali, led by a high priest; each independent *sangoma* and each lodge is tributary to this cult, forwarding a portion of the revenue from clients and from ritual guidance of *twazas*; and finally
- the central shrines of the Mwali cult in the Matopos hills in south-western Zimbabwe, where the tribute is claimed to go to ultimately.

This specific organisation has antecedents in remote history. It is in constant flux, since from its basis ever new lodges crystallise out around independent

¹ Cf. chapter 1; and van Binsbergen 1980a, 1980b, 1985b, 1988a, and forthcoming (c).

sangomas, while other lodges disappear when their leader dies or moves away. At the higher levels a rather firm organisational structure exists, consisting of permanent shrines, each with their own cult region.¹ At the basis, however, the cultic organisational structure typically displays the general form of the *cults of affliction*. In the religious anthropology of Africa we mean by cult of affliction:

a therapeutic movement that spreads over a geographical and social space by means of a chain reaction, in such a way that the members of the congregation who have been attracted as patients by a certain cult leader, might each attain their own independent status of cult leader, each with her own group of clients, in order to form a congregation that is spatially and socially independent from that of the original congregation, and so on.²

In contemporary global culture, the model is familiar from chain letters, pyramid games, and Tupperware sales campaigns.

Ever since the enactment of the Societies Act of Botswana (1972) a parallel formal organisation has been added to this cultic structure in the form of a professional organisation: the Kwame/Legwame Traditional Association. In this association *sangomas* organise themselves on a loose basis, under the leadership of the association's chairman, who is the regional high priest of the Mwali cult. The *sangomas* (more typically the lodge leaders) pay a fee for life membership. The professional organisation is the interface between the traditional organisational structure on the one hand, and on the other hand modern life, where the post-colonial state has taken it upon itself to watch over public health and the medical profession. Admission to the professional association is only possible with nomination by another member, who has to be established as a fully accomplished independent *sangoma*. If the authorities insist (but civil servants are demonstrably afraid of these clubs of 'witchdoctors') this professional formal organisation may go through the official motions of producing a annual general meeting, official annual returns stating the details of the association's executive, etc. The association enables *sangomahood* to present a Janus face³ to the state:⁴ one pretends to resign oneself to the organisational format imposed by the Societies Act, yet one goes on doing what one has been doing for hundreds of years, on the basis of a power disposition that is acknowledged and feared by the wider society, and that is totally independent from the modern state. This does not preclude the existence of interfaces with the state, even interfaces independent of the framework created by the Societies Act. Several *sangomas* – including myself – count major politicians among their clients, especially in times of elections; and prominent *sangoma* lodges are invited by the authorities to enliven collective celebrations of Independence Day, etc. with their

¹ Werbner 1977b, 1989a; Daneel 1970a; Schoffeleers & Mwanza 1979; Schoffeleers 1977.

² Cf. Turner 1968a, 1968b; White 1949, 1961; van Binsbergen 1981a; Fortune 1973.

³ For a further development of the Janus motif in African social organisation and communication today, cf. chapter 10.

⁴ Cf. Staugård 1986a; van Binsbergen 1993b.

colourful ‘traditional’ dances. A local politician was the socially highest ranking speaker at the funeral of the lodge leader MmaNdlovu in Francistown in 1989.

Given the Janus face performatively shown to the state, the reader may imagine that our concept of integrity is not truly constitutive of this professional association, especially given the deadly competition between independent *sangomas*. But one might also interpret the situation as if these spiritual leaders (like some of their remote colleagues in the North Atlantic tradition; cf. the stereotypical reputation for diplomacy and subtle strategy in the case of the Jesuit order of the Roman Catholic church) reserve their integrity for the long term and for their dealings with the supernatural; while, merely in order to safeguard this integrity at the highest level, they pay a fairly effective lip-service to publicly mediated norms and values in their dealings with humans, especially civil servants. In the case of the *sangomas*, this lip-service is never totally consistent, and I think this is on purpose: to the extent that the spiritual leader manifestly does not play the public game quite by the rules but takes a few liberties, he demonstrates the security which his supernatural powers accord him – he can afford to make light with the rules of the state. Thus he mediates, publicly, his own power claims based on esoteric norms and values that are not derived from the statal domain but that do have public support. For a senior *sangoma* tends to have a considerable number of clients, many of whom make great financial sacrifices in the context of their therapy and *twazahood*, while also the non-clients including civil servants greatly fear *sangoma* power.

During the colonial period the public practice of *sangomahood* was prohibited, especially four-tablet divination that is an essential element of such practice; the prohibition was justified by reference to human sacrifices that were sometimes based on such divination.¹ At that time traditional therapeutic practices went underground. In independent Botswana (since 1966) such prohibitions no longer apply. Today the practice of traditional medicine is regulated by a duly certified licence to be issued, under strict conditions of proven expertise, by a professional association of traditional healers. Such a document is recognised by the state as the sole proof of qualification for the practice of traditional medicine. In principle (not counting excesses) it protects the bearers from prosecution in case a patient suffers injury during therapy, or even dies. The same document exempts the bearer in practice – perhaps mainly because of the fear it inspires – from a number of government regulations, such as those concerning endangered animal species (skins, ivory and other animal products play a major role in the traditional medicine of Southern Africa and elsewhere), and opens doors to domains whose access is highly regulated for the general public (hospitals, cemeteries, game parks, wholesalers’ outlets).

¹ Wilson 1931.

6.4. Concrete answers

The above supplies some of the data required for an initial answer to the obvious questions concerning the integrity of my intercultural mediation as a *sangoma*.

In accordance with the norms and values of contemporary Botswana I have been legitimated as a *sangoma* in the only way culturally defined for such legitimation.¹ Subsequently, by the required forms of initiation, I first obtained the degree of *twaza*, in the presence of hundreds of eye-witnesses. For a full year I subjected myself to very demanding taboos in a bid to undergo further spiritual maturation; I also engaged in further training in divination. Although this year was largely spent in the Netherlands, its format was defined by detailed directions that I received from the lodge beforehand. I was monitored by correspondence, and after my return to Francistown I was thoroughly examined as to my faithful performance in the year of my absence, and as to my resulting spiritual progress. I was told to live for a few weeks in the village of Matshelagabedi, at an hour's drive from the town. In that period I graduated to become a fully-fledged *sangoma*, in the presence of several dozen of witnesses, mainly members – that is, previous graduates of the same lodge, who had been told by the lodge leader to travel to Matshelagabedi exclusively for the purpose of attending my graduation. I was admitted as a member of one of the four professional associations of traditional healers that Botswana could boast around 1990 (two of these were moribund, but our own association was certainly not). Of this admission I have a duly signed and stamped certificate² for display in my surgery – which coincides with my study at home. The floor of that study is partly covered with the consecrated, tanned goat skins derived from sacrificial animals that I publicly killed in the context of my several initiations in the presence of other ritual specialists, and whose pulsating blood I have publicly drunk directly from their cut throats when they were being sacrificed – non-*sangomas* in Botswana consider such drinking a horrible transgressive act which no ordinary human being would, nor could, perform. Besides I have in my possession a smaller certificate of membership of the professional association, with photograph, stamp and chairman's signature, meant to be carried with me on a day-to-day basis. After my final graduation, I was confirmed in my office by the oracle of the High God Mwali at the regional shrine at Nata, Botswana; as proof of this I have in my possession several consecrated paraphernalia, including a leopard skin sanctified in that shrine and put on my shoulders by the high priest. Fellow *sangomas*, other traditional healers (including my principal teacher of divination, the late Mr Smarts Gumede, until his death in 1992 a prominent herbalist in Francistown and sometime treasurer of the professional association to which I now belong), and scores of patients in Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa, have recognised my claim of being a *sangoma*, and have enlisted me as their therapist. I was even the spiritual advisor of

¹ By public ancestral trance, etc., see above in this chapter, and chapter 5.

² Available for inspection at: http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/credent.htm .

Mr Gumede when, just before his death in 1992, he made his last journey to his region of origin in Zimbabwe. A similar practical recognition can also be found among dozens of clients in the Netherlands and (through the Internet) worldwide. I treat them with the diagnostic and therapeutic disposition that has been extended to me as a *sangoma*. In this practice trance scarcely plays a role: just as is the case with most of my colleagues in Southern Africa, trance only comes in during the ancestral dancing rituals that *sangomas* perform among themselves, usually in the secluded context of the lodge.

In the spring of 1994 a test case offered itself for the extent to which my claims of full *sangomahood* can be negotiated at the intercultural and international legal level. I was largely unaware of the CITES treaty regulations that since the late 1980s have internationally governed all transactions involving species threatened with extinction. The large and legitimate game-trophy dealer, who had sold me the leopard skin prior to its consecration at Nata in 1991, had told me how to get an export licence for it, and this I obtained in accordance with CITES regulations. But such a licence is valid for one international border crossing only, and expires within a year. In the years following 1991 I used to travel backwards and forwards several times a year between the Netherlands and Southern Africa, carrying my consecrated leopard skin in my luggage as a matter of course, never offering bribes but showing my professional licence whenever an explanation was needed in a Southern African official context. There never was a problem until, early 1994, in the course of a routine check the leopard skin was confiscated at Amsterdam International Airport under the CITES regulations. During half a year a voluminous file was allowed to build up at the Haarlem regional court under whose jurisdiction the airport falls, but finally the leopard skin was returned to me in formal recognition of its extraordinary religious function. I then also obtained, at the court's initiative and without me even asking for it, a permanent, multi-entry import and export licence for this game trophy, even though in principle it constitutes a prohibited possession under CITES regulations. This outcome is all the more significant since on the same occasion also a non-consecrated python skin was confiscated – of the kind with which *sangomas* like to embellish their surgery. Being totally unlicensed, and obviously a merely discretionary addition to my paraphernalia, this python skin was not returned but officially destroyed, and cost me a fine of nearly Euro €100. The events constitute an interesting instance of jurisprudence in intercultural environmental legislation.

6.5. Instant coffee, or *Arabica*?

When all is said and done, one of my interlocutors (Robert Buijtenhuijs) asked me, what does my *sangomahood* amount to: 'instant coffee, or *arabica*?' In other words:

- (a) either a feeble imitation that one may appropriate *à la minute* (and that perhaps is nothing more but a meaningless, self-indulgent, exoticising anti-intellectualist stance on my part), or

(b) the real work, that requires years of loving dedication and actual practice.

The question looks rhetorical, suggesting a simple, self-evident answer: (a). In the same way as Western researchers, fascinated (like Buijtenhuijs has been throughout his career) by national-level political topicalities, may reduce so much that constitutes the encounter between Africa and the North Atlantic region, to simple, manageable proportions with astonishing ease: to the format of an international language, of globally marketed firearms and globally enforced national political institutions, to magical words such as ‘revolution’ and ‘democracy’ for which international institutions and movements provide the backing power, to elegant informants of the highest political and intellectual levels dressed in three-piece suits – and never, of course, an indigenous African language that one can only master by sweat, blood and tears; never the wooden mock weapons, the deadly poisons and the undomesticated magical incantations of a local African cult; never the mobbing cacophony of voices and of social claims that in the course of fieldwork in rural or low-class urban Africa expel from the fieldworker’s consciousness not only the wider external framework of theory, but even the awareness of self; never the rough concrete floor on which one first dances the ecstatic dance on one’s bare feet until these are bleeding and sore from stamping, after which one goes to sleep on the same floor along with one’s *sangoma* sisters and brothers who by this time of night are usually dead-drunk – their ages vary between seventeen and seventy-five, but the higher age bracket is over-represented by far. As Buijtenhuijs admitted in a review of a collection of soul-searching essays on the personal, existential side of African studies edited by Martin Doornbos and myself, one can perfectly be an Africanist without loving Africa – but then, of course, since Africa is a recent geopolitical construct, not loving that hegemonic or counter-hegemonic figment of the imagination may well be a sign of utter sanity.¹

As Africanist anthropologists and intercultural philosophers it is perhaps not our task to *judge* African cultural manifestations (such as *sangomahood*); but as colleagues within an academic discipline we have both the right and the duty to judge each other’s professional integrity. Buijtenhuijs’s pertinent question boils down to the following: are those aspects of my *sangomahood* that smack of superficiality and commodification, of inauthenticity (‘instant coffee’), due to my own exceptional situation? Or are they simply built-in aspects of Francistown *sangomahood*, regardless of whether that is pursued by Wim van Binsbergen or by any other qualified Francistown *sangoma*?²

Although my situation adds unique features to whatever characterises Francistown *sangomahood* in general, I would claim that my *sangomahood* is both *instant coffee* (in a figurative sense) and *arabica* (in a literal sense) at the same time.

¹ Buijtenhuijs 1988.

² For a discussion of the same dilemma from the detached and impersonal perspective of commodification theory, cf. van Binsbergen 1999c.

Sangomahood in Francistown is a cosmopolitan, non-rural, no-longer-local version of the Southern African mediumistic religion.¹ In the Francistown version of this cult Black foreigners (Zimbabweans, South Africans, Zambians) happen to play dominant roles anyway, to such an extent that there was manifestly room for a couple of Dutch people (my wife and myself) who turned out to have close connections with South Central Africa (the former was born there, the latter in the course of decades of fieldwork was officially adopted there). The Francistown variety of *sangomahood* does not entail the construction of a self-evident, profoundly local, symbolic universe such as appears to be, for instance, the case with its counterpart in the countryside of Zululand.² Francistown *sangomahood* is a phenomenon of the mass society in which many clients, and not just myself and my wife, first have to be converted or re-converted to the *sangoma* world view before any kind of diagnosis and therapy can be extended to them at all. The *sangoma* objects (textiles, beads, sacrificial animals, often even the medicines) all have to be bought and are not supposed to come from one's own stock; they derive from the diffuse, unbounded space that we are nowadays accustomed to call 'the market' – not the diminutive little vegetable market in the centre of Francistown (that is shyly tucked away between megalomaniac secular temples of the capitalist mode of production: offices and shopping malls in a cosmopolitan boomtown architecture), but simply the abstract, worldwide network of commercial transactions. Those *sangoma* attributes reflect centuries, not of a village horizon closed onto itself, but of continental and intercontinental trade, and the movement of people and ideas.³ And it is the same trade that made it possible for an Arabic divination system (on which we will say more below and in the next chapter) to succeed in taking root in Southern Africa, in an almost perfect African disguise that is therefore difficult to see through.⁴ Nor does the spatial and temporal unboundedness of the *sangoma* cult stop here. As a cosmopolitan system the *sangoma* religion is meant to keep a sufficiently low threshold so as to catch in strangers – in the first place as patients, but according to the general structural format of the cults of affliction some patients are bound to become doctors, leaders themselves. And such low thresholds imply the possibility of a crash course, of shortcuts to accomplished adeptness, even leadership. Probably this is a disappointing statement for those readers, including many Western medical anthropologists, who tend to take for granted that indigenous therapy systems in Southern Africa are characterised by high levels of aesthetics,

¹ This theme has also been well recognised by John Janzen in his comparative study of contemporary cults of affliction (see above note) in South Central and Southern Africa: Janzen 1992, 1993. However, severe criticism has been levelled against Janzen's approach, e.g. by the Workgroup African Religion Utrecht which was founded by Matthew Schoffeleers; van Dijk *et al.* 2000. For important comparative material from the same region, cf. Oosthuizen 1968, 1986; Oosthuizen *et al.* 1989. For a detailed transregional and historical analysis of *sangomahood*, cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

² Berglund 1989; van Nieuwenhuijsen 1974; Ngubane [= Sibisi] 1977, 1975, 1986; Lee 1969; Gussler 1973.

³ Cf. van Binsbergen 1999c; the present book, chapters 7 and 8.

⁴ Van Binsbergen 1994d, 1995a, 1996b, 1996c, 1996e, 1997c.

originality, inaccessibility, a strictly local nature, enormous complexity, and the requirement of a difficult training extending over many years. The translocal nature of the Francistown *sangoma* complex defeats the assumptions of classic Africanist anthropology with its image of Africa as a patchwork quilt of myriad discrete, bounded, specific cultures each closed and fully integrated into itself. By contrast, recent work on the globalisation of African socio-cultural systems is increasingly offering the interpretative theoretical framework by which such translocal African cults can be understood in a dynamic translocal context.¹

6.6. A speedy career?

Despite this likelihood of shortcuts to adeptness and leadership, against the background of the comparative literature there is yet certainly reason to be surprised at the speed of my *sangoma* career. I found myself in the hands of two elderly cousins, Mrs MmaNdlovu (Rosie) and Mrs MmaChakayile (Elizabeth) Mabutu, both of whom were leaders of prominent lodges in Francistown. Their maternal grandfather had been a White man, and they very soon became convinced that I was their deceased brother or cousin Johannes in reincarnated form. Johannes² is the name of my father's brother, it is my third given name, and to boot it is the name that I myself chose as a ten-year-old at the Roman Catholic rite of confirmation; at the time there was certainly no conscious reference to my father's brother – I was simply impressed by both evangelic John figures, the Baptist and the disciple 'John the brother of James'; and I wanted to make sure that both would extend their patronage to me. However, I absolutely never used the name of Johannes until the *sangoma* leaders projected this name upon me out of their own initiative. Johannes meanwhile is a common given name in Southern Africa, deriving from the Afrikaner context; cf. the placename Johannesburg, the 'City of Gold' (*Goli*), the Southern African subcontinent's metropole which for African migrants epitomises everything modernity stands for. With the name of Johannes, I was no longer an outsider-patient who had been captured to acquire a ritual role at the lodge. On the contrary, the name conveyed a message to the effect that I had always belonged to the lodge and that I was simply reincorporated in it as a central member of the *sangoma* family that constituted the core of the lodge congregation. With the construction of me being identical to their brother Johannes, the lodge members could entertain the thought that when I spoke in trance, it was not only my own ancestors – or spirits trying to pass as such – who spoke through my mouth, but also the ancestors of the lodge leaders. Not that my possessing spirits presented such a clear picture. Sithole had

¹ Cf., especially on *sangomahood*, the chapters 7 and 8; more in general the chapters 12, 13 and 15, and especially the references to other researchers' work as cited there.

² The Dutch, ultimately Greek, version of Hebrew *Iowhannan*, 'Jehovah-favoured'; in English: John; cf. Strong 1989. Some scholars have suspected that *Oannes*, the name of the amphibian Sumerian god and culture hero, underlies the Hebrew name; in that case even older long-range resonances may be contemplated here.

divined my real father's father to be my possessing spirit. However, not my father's father but two other possessing spirits were reported by my fellow-*sangomas* to manifest themselves whenever I entered into trance at MmaChakayile's lodge: an Afrikaans-speaking transcontinental migrant claiming to be a paternal great uncle but unknown to me from what precious little I know about my father's family history; and, apparently Nkoya-speaking ('a mixture of Ndebele, Nyanja, Kalanga, and other languages', as my colleagues reported; they did not know Nkoya and simply listed familiar South Central and Southern African languages that are much more similar to Nkoya than Tswana is), Timuna, no doubt the Zambian king of that name, whose son Mwene Kahare Kabambi had adopted me in the course of my long association with his court and his people since the early 1970s.

At the time, and until very recently, I had no knowledge of the remarkable Johannite undercurrent in the occult tradition in the West, and also among the Mandaeans of Southern Iraq, according to which John the Baptist deserves the exalted place as the main prophet of humankind, a place that – in their particular, highly contentious view – Jesus of Nazareth is alleged to have usurped by sinister means.¹ The possibility of such a Johannite influence on *sangomahood* cannot be totally dismissed. There are certain traits of *sangomahood* that are reminiscent of gnosticism or Late Antiquity spirituality in general. For instance, *sangomas* claim

'We are the gods'

– in Tswana and Kalanga there is no lexical distinction between High God, lesser gods, and ancestors, all being called by the word *modimo*. Now the expression

'Know ye not that ye are gods?'

is a central Hermetic adage, besides having biblical resonances.² And like in Late Antiquity, a standard *sangoma* technique for the acquisition of magical power is to capture a spirit (for this purpose throughout Southern Africa wooden honey-pots circulate, with a tight lid; they are best used at night at a fresh grave). There is the remotest possibility that the *sangoma*'s insistence on the name Johannes goes back to a source in the eastern Mediterranean region at the onset of the Common Era. This could very well be combined with the claim of an Egyptian origin, as articulated by the Nata high priest, and with the term *hosanna* for Mwali adepts.³ However, the transcontinental connections we will find in chapter 8 point in a different direction, towards South Asia (which, however, with its legendary veneration of the Apostle Thomas, was not without its share of early Christianity either).

The conviction that I was their deceased brother or cousin Johannes was a major aspect of my rapid career as a *sangoma*, but I cannot readily explain where the leaders' conviction came from. Did they read about Johannes's return in their

¹ Cf. Picknett & Prince 1998; Eisler 1931; Mead 1924; Webb 1991.

² Ps. 82: 6; Zech. 12: 8; 2 Thess. 2: 4.

³ Cf. section 8.1.

oracular tablets? Had that return been prophesied during their trance? (If so, it would not have registered with themselves in view of their altered state of consciousness, but it would have been reported to them by other lodge members after the leaders' return to normal consciousness). Did they dream about Johannes's return? This point simply never came up, and the power relations within the lodge rendered it impossible for me to make this question (or most other questions) the topic of a long and incisive interview! Needless to say, this play with identities, across the boundary between life and death, had an unsettling and sinister effect on me, in hindsight comparable to brainwashing.

Constantly the leaders, especially MmaChakayile, emphasised that I would turn out to be a great healer, who would easily retrieve, from the revenue of his practice, all the financial investments that had to be made during the various initiations. In principle these are standard pronouncements addressed to every *twaza*. It is therefore certainly possible to explain these pronouncements also in my case as merely the justification for the substantial financial claims that the lodge makes on the *twazas*. However, that the lodge leader was fully in earnest about my special election as a healer is suggested by the fact that she went out of her way to arrange for me to have a licence as a traditional healer, already upon my first accession as a *twaza*, when my graduation as a *sangoma* was still very far away and might never have materialised. Or was the identification between me and their deceased brother/cousin merely based on the hope that MmaChakayile would phrase so repeatedly during her nocturnal spells of inebriation: the hope that after her death I would lead the *sangoma* family, look after it financially, and administer the lodge's spiritual inheritance? She and her cousin Rosie were two fairly genial women, who were fascinated with incarnation and for whom delusion and reality, life and death, present and past, would constantly merge – a blurring of boundaries that might be termed a professional hazard; my wife and I experienced a similar unsettlement during the first weeks of our engagement with the lodge. In MmaChakayile's case, this general professional condition was further acerbated by alcoholism. Although in Francistown life, Rosie and Elizabeth were greatly feared, and occasionally revered, by their neighbours and occasional patients, they could not ignore that being a *sangoma* accorded them a precarious and largely negative social status. All patients and prospective adepts in Botswana are aware that most people greatly abhor the thought of their child, sibling or spouse becoming a *sangoma*. In view of their association with great occult powers (especially the spirits of the Shumba cult) and with the dead, the *sangomas* in Francistown by 1990 were perhaps even more proverbial 'others' than even the White Afrikaners, i.e. Boers. I have little doubt that for MmaNdlovu and MmaChakayile my entry into their lives, besides the promise of financial gain that any affluent patient would represent to any healer, enhanced their desire to resolve the ambiguities of their social status, since my presence allowed them to insist once more on the idealised White status of their grandfather, with whom I was constantly compared by them. Ironically, it was my very status as a White Boer (Dutchmen in Francistown are automatically classified as such,

regardless of whatever protest is filed on historical, linguistic or genetic grounds) which had turned out my greatest handicap throughout the first year of my Francistown research; in fact I had only joined the *sangomas* in search of therapy after my mental breakdown at the rejection I was experiencing from the local population at large, because the latter perceived me as another specimen of the local hereditary enemy, the Boers.

Yet we cannot lightly dismiss the suggestion that MmaNdlovu and especially, after the latter's death, MmaChakayile were partly driven by the desire for financial gain. This might explain how, under MmaChakayile's guidance, I was rushed through the *twaza* period in far less than the ordinarily required time. In that case my *sangomahood* could well be disqualified as 'instant coffee' instead of pure 'Arabica': the cult leader could be suspected of according to me a religious status she knew I was not ripe for, simply because she needed the money. MmaChakayile's lodge around 1990 did have a very serious cash-flow problem: very few paying *twazas* had come to swell the ranks; it became ever more difficult to buy the alcoholic drink to which the lodge leader was addicted; the quality of the meals at the lodge was very poor for lack of relish; and within a few years one of the most prominent lodge members, Nancy,¹ found herself in prison for soft-drugs dealing, something she would not have done if she did not need the money. Yet an interpretation that the lodge leader's venality lies at the root of my *sangomahood* cannot be sustained, for several convincing reasons. In 1990, when my own infatuation with *twazahood* was at its summit and I would have been prepared to pay anything to be accepted as a fully-fledged *sangoma*, no financial demands were made on me beyond bringing, in kind, the ingredients for the collective meal marking my initiation into *twazahood* (chapter 5 of this book); but while more than a hundred people were fed out of my money on that occasion, this benefitted the community of Monarch and the extended network of *sangomas* much more than it did the lodge members. In the same year, MmaChakayile went out her way to let me have, prematurely, a traditional doctor's licence through membership of Sinombe's association, although I had absolutely never indicated that that was what I aspired. MmaChakayile may have been short of cash, but Sinombe was certainly not, as the leading regional representative of (a branch of) the Mwali cult, and owner of several thriving secular businesses in addition to the herbalist trade for which he was famous. If under those conditions I was made a certified fellow traditional healer against the mere fee of Pula P35 for Sinombe (scarcely enough to buy two people lunch at the respectable restaurants of Francistown at the time), and no payment whatsoever for MmaChakayile at this stage, this can only have been out of professional conviction in a context of integrity, which was not dropped simply for petty financial gain. Even although I was still a *twaza* at the time, these events in 1990 in which cash played a very minor role made it inevitable for me to eventually emerge as a *sangoma*. Admittedly, in the next year I found the total 'tuition fee' for

¹ A pseudonym.

my *twazahood* right up to final graduation as a *sangoma* suddenly doubled on the day I came to pay; but in the process, MmaChakayile had thrown in a sheep and a black bull (together representing a monetary value far exceeding my tuition fee) and had carried a fair portion of the cost of my coming-out party, so here again the allegation of venality is not appropriate.

6.7. Mediumistic trance

Another thing that has caused surprise is the fact that the public legitimization of my election as a *sangoma* had to be based on mediumistic trance (a combination of a somatically manifest altered state of consciousness with coherent and interpretable statements uttered in that condition and attributed to a consciousness external to and different from that of the owner of the body in trance). Our North Atlantic dualistic tradition goes back to Augustine and late Antiquity as a whole, from there to Plato, and via him probably to Ancient Egypt with its ‘death industry’¹ based for millennia on the separation between body and soul. This dualistic tradition (which in early modern times came to be epitomised by Descartes) has generated such epistemological and metaphysical aporia, that professional philosophers are now largely in agreement as to the obsolete nature of that doctrine.² Yet the idea of such dualism still dominates the social sciences, as well as much of everyday pre- and quasi-scientific language use in the North Atlantic region. Under such dualism, body–mind dissociation as in trance is a possibility; the capability however of disembodied minds to exist, and even to be able to take over the body of a temporarily dissociated living person, and to speak through his or her mouth, would under such dualism be relegated to mere fantasy, science fiction – in short, would be incredible. In the North Atlantic tradition mediumistic trance is therefore the paroxysm of otherness, a condition that cannot possibly be within the reach of the normal capabilities of a Dutch anthropologist/poet/philosopher like myself.

What then is mediumistic trance? To what extent has it been acquired by training? To what extent is it performative? I have been preoccupied with these questions ever since my earliest research into ecstatic religion, over thirty years ago in North Africa; and already then I knew, from personal experience during field-work, that it is not so difficult to induce trance in oneself, provided this is done in the right kind of environment (among people of the same inclination, people who know trance and who expect trance) and with the right kind of music. Moreover, in Ancient Germanic north-western Europe, shamanistic traits generally associated with the god Odin (although often played down by the great authority Dumézil)³ as well as the *berserker* tradition (the twelve entranced, bear-possessed bodyguards of the Teutonic army general), and the *tarantula* and *moresca* tradition in early modern

¹ I borrow this illuminating term from Thoden van Velzen & van Wetering 1988.

² Cf. Ryle 1949; Hart 1988, 1998.

³ Dumézil 1939, 1959, 1970: 69f.

times throughout the same continent (not to speak of the secular trances commonly induced in the sphere of contemporary pop culture, *house* concerts, etc. today), demonstrate that trance is far more a European phenomenon than is commonly assumed.¹ Trance could be an ancestral disposition in a White European even without invoking African ancestors.

What is more, many mainstream psychologists and psychiatrists have come to consider trance as a *normal condition of the healthy human consciousness*, albeit that traumatic events and especially violence (such as characterised my own childhood and that of the majority of my fellow human beings) are recognised to enhance an individual's capability of entering into trance as a protective retreat onto oneself.²

Let us dwell a bit more on the cultural material out of which the trance is shaped as a *sangoma* performance. The ancestors who manifest themselves during trance, make the medium perform little sketches in which the other cultic personnel of the lodge act as interlocutors or extras. These sketches, and the texts spoken in their connection, are of a highly stereotypical nature. Almost invariably they are structured in the following way. The ancestor announces his or her arrival in that, after a few moments' silence, the medium begins to speak in a moaning, faltering, languished voice that is very different from that person's normal voice. Lodge members who are not in trance then engage in conversation with the ancestor. The latter identifies himself, by manner of speech and personal idiosyncrasies, and often also by explicitly mentioning his name and his kin relation vis-à-vis a member of the audience. The ancestor turns out to be extremely thirsty and hungry, which (as adherents to the *sangoma* tradition have repeatedly explained to me) is understandable in someone who has been dead for a long time and who has not partaken of food nor drink for all that time. Without delay, easily digestible and old-fashioned food and drink is brought: water, traditionally brewed beer, raw eggs, maize porridge without relish. Trembling, drooling and messing as befits a centenarian, the medium eagerly swallows this food and drink. After having been thus satisfied, the ancestor volunteers important information concerning those present in the audience: serious diseases from which one suffers unknowingly, imminent life danger, sorcery to which one is secretly exposed, and specific requests that the ancestor has with regard to the medium through whose mouth he speaks: the medium is to perform a sacrifice, is to purchase and wear specific items of clothing and paraphernalia of a specific colour, etc. If there are young mothers present from among the lodge membership, they seize the opportunity of bringing the ancestral spirit in contact with their infant, giving the latter into the hands of the medium. Gentleness is not an operative word here, and I have witnessed repeatedly how infants were thoroughly shaken, or held upside down by one foot, in the hands of a

¹ Fleck 1971a, 1971b; de Vries 1957: II 27f; Anonymous 1975a; Anonymous 1961a; Vandenbroeck 1997; Stricker 1963-1989: III 376, 526 n 3792 gives exhaustive references on this point to the Ancient Germanic literature.

² Herman 1993: 66 and extensive references there (p. 308 nn 41-42).

medium whose possessing ancestor apparently regarded his infant offspring more as a war trophy or a sceptre than as a vulnerable newborn baby. But the mothers found not the slightest fault with this way of handling their children. After five to ten minutes the ancestor's voice will sound even more tired and low than before, the conversation becomes halting and begins to be alternated with silences, and soon the spirit will depart, leaving the medium unconscious and (as stipulated by the *sangoma* tradition) entirely unaware of what has been said or consumed during trance. The medium is then woken up by the lodge members, and receives a full report of whatever the visiting spirit has said and done. Great *sangomas*, like MmaChakayile, are induced by their visiting spirit to dance, and take their leave with a parting song in the manner described in the previous chapter.

Apart from a certain level of language competence, such mediumistic sketches do not require any great mental or physical efforts, regardless of whether one is in trance or not. However, it is far more difficult to deal with the trance condition itself, and this requires expert supervision by someone who is not himself in trance. A trance that is disrupted or that is not terminated in the proper way is said to lead to severe mental and physical distress among the Southern African *sangomas*, and also in Zambia and Tunisia.

6.8. Doubts and contradictions

Besides these interesting but rather innocent puzzles there are the real contradictions that have caused me to be, now and on second thoughts, less defenceless, less blindly enthusiastic about the *sangoma* cult than I let myself be known to be in my first text about *sangomahood*, many years ago.¹

I have never been able to overcome my repugnance at the excessive alcohol consumption that is the order of the day at the lodge. While the sacred (ancestors, other spirits, divination, reincarnation, supernatural retribution and election) is rarely verbalised in the conversations of lodge members, an alarming proportion of their conversation revolves around drinking, the various types of alcoholic drink, their pros and cons, the task of procuring them, the cash needed for this; and this obsession only becomes more marked as inebriation advances.

Then again, it is extremely demanding to devote oneself to ecstatic dancing night after night as the most junior, most lowly placed *twaza*, at the inexorable directions of cult personnel some of whom are young enough to be one's own daughters, especially if this has to take place at a generally feared 'witchdoctor's compound' in Monarch, which is one of the most sinister suburbs of Francistown anyway. The lodge members are singing, drumming and dancing. Besides the *sangomas*, dozens of non-*sangoma* inhabitants fill this compound to the brim, occupying the many small rooms as distant kinsmen, tenants and their dependants. Through boozing, consumption of narcotics, inarticulate utterances, obscene songs, electronically

¹ Cf. chapter 5.

produced profane music to which profane dances are danced, these outsiders to the *sangoma* cult explicitly and emphatically take their distance from the activities of their traditionalist kinsmen and landlords, the *sangomas*. The *sangomas* are publicly feared, but their activities are also considered a source of embarrassment from the point of view of the public Francistonian culture of churches, pop music and fashionable clothing – from the point of view of modernity. This distancing from the part of the compound population whose main aim in life appeared to be the selective emulation of the European lifestyle that I was so emphatically opting out from, lend a disconcerting comment to my own newly acquired *sangomahood*.

Or, to mention something else, when – tiptoeing through the night on my bare feet with a white nylon bedsheet over my head – I had finally acquired access to the Nata shrine, having brought my expensive leopard skin and having paid the excessive entrance fee to the shrine, of course I could not help noticing how much the voice of Mwali – even if it was speaking to me in *Dutch* (not Afrikaans – at least, this is what I remember) and manifestly knew my personal secrets – was similar to the voice of the high priest who was the only one allowed to enter the holy of holies from which the voice was emanating. And of course I felt curtailed in my freedom of consumer choice when the divine Voice instructed me to purchase certain additional paraphernalia from the same high priest at exorbitant prices. Of course I was shocked when the professional association's vice-chairman Munayowe¹ – the very person who had taken us to Nata after my graduation – was not allowed to enter the shrine because after his accession to office he had specialised in procuring success medicine prepared out of children's penises (which the original owners of these organs did not survive). It was certainly disappointing that the clump of solid gold that MmaChakayile gave me after my graduation to take to the Netherlands and sell, turned out to be a pebble covered with gold paint (kindly imagine the scene at my friendly goldsmith's shop, just around the corner of my Haarlem home!).

Had the stone been truly gold when I received it, and had it only turned into a pebble because the splendours of *sangomahood*, in my hands, could not survive being transplanted to the North Atlantic region? That would be a truly pious reading, and one totally at variance with my argument on the, otherwise, successful local redefinition of *sangomahood* in chapter 7 below. Was the painted stone just an ironic comment on my own integrity, and not on MmaChakayile's? After all, why would she deliberately give me fake gold after publicly claiming me as her son, brother, successor, for two years? Gold mining as a local industry is a few thousand years old in the region covered by the Mwali cult. Regional cults have been known to establish networks of commodity exchange over vast areas; gold, cattle, and transoceanic trade goods have been major objects of regional and transregional exchange here for millennia. In this light I suspect that when MmaChakayile gave me the clump of gold, she acted in good faith, and sought to make not so much a unique gift, but to discharge an institutional obligation, as other cult leaders may have had towards

¹ A pseudonym.

other graduating *sangoms*, evoking the cult's (presumably) time-honoured role in the transregional circulation of wealth. I should have inquired into all this, but the subject was too painful to be followed up during later visits; and once again my role at the lodge precluded such objectifying questioning.

And of course, in my longing for new appropriations and a new 'place to feel at home',¹ the affirmation of acceptance implied in my 'becoming a *sangoma*' held the risk of remaining one-sided, after all: my belief to have found a new home was not necessarily shared by those who, I assumed, were giving me one. Was it mere projection and transference from my personal infantile problematic of homelessness and particularly my Lacanian desire of being reunited with the mother? Was it my encounter, as a juvenile hero, with the mother archetype, or with the *anima*? Or, again, were MmaChakayile's supervision, and the graduation I received from her hands, genuine (the sheep and bull she sacrificed on my behalf leave little doubt on this point), and for that very reason resented by other *sangomas* who had graduated under her and who could only feel threatened and jealous at the way she, in her senility and inebriation, privileged me, a White man, a hereditary enemy, a newcomer, over all others? I was rather disillusioned when a friend among the audience told me (the day after the event) that on the day of my graduation some of the *sangomas* were overheard to say among each other in Ndebele

'Today we shall kill that Boer thing.'²

Then it also turned out that the bruises on my body after my main graduation dance had to be attributed to the fact that these same colleagues had not caught me, as is usual, when I fell in trance, but had callously let me drop flatly onto the ground. Obviously they had not just referred to my symbolic transformation from White into Black person, not just to the spiritual rebirth that since van Gennep³ has been a cliché applied to any initiation, but simply to my physical destruction. Were they out for my blood?

The theme of extreme jealousy also came up when I returned from the Mwali shrine at Nata, confirmed as a *sangoma* by the highest authority, and with the newly consecrated leopard skin around my shoulders to prove it. MmaTedi, one of the senior *sangomas* and a classificatory sister to MmaChakayile, attempted with great hostility to rip the sacred skin off my shoulders, and it was hinted to me that the leopard skin was a sign of a higher rank than any of the other lodge members could boast with the exception of MmaChakayile herself. I could not help realising that I was in the company of murderers, who had great knowledge of natural poisons, and for whom the boundary between life and death is not a real boundary because they believe themselves to be reincarnate ancestral spirits anyway. MmaNdlovu, our

¹ A standard expression in African religious studies, based on Welbourn & Ogot 1966; cf. my application of this theme in: van Binsbergen 2000b.

² *Liburu*: 'Afrikaner, Dutchman; non-human, neutral' (as is indicated by the prefix *li-*).

³ Van Gennep 1909.

spiritual leader before MmaChakayile, had died under suspect circumstances, and was believed to have been poisoned in competition over control over my wife and myself as wealthy and prestigious White adepts. Munayowe, the vice-chairman of our *sangoma* guild, was generally acknowledged to be a serial killer. If my graduation caused such jealousy, I risked being killed, too, once I had paid my graduation fee. I had been warned by our family doctor long before.

My quest for knowledge and access had reached its final destination.¹ Undeniably I had become a publicly acknowledged African ritual specialist, with all the powers, real and imagined, that attach to that status. No one could take my *sangomahood* away from me any more. However, my quest for being appropriated, my quest to find a home among the *sangomas* of Francistown, had shipwrecked. That specialists in ecstatic religion are often engaged in competition on life and death over power, prestige and followers, I had learned many years before, in Tunisia and Zambia. I was not shocked but knew that my life was in danger. I had graduated and was free to establish myself as a *sangoma*, with my own patients and adepts. I left the lodge, and only returned there on short courtesy visits, during which I was careful not to eat and drink anything that I was offered.

Clearly, my 'becoming a *sangoma*' did not proceed without a good deal of psychological hardship including quite a few lost illusions. It was quite an *Aha-Erlebnis* when, long after my graduation as a *sangoma*, one of the first-ever books on brainwashing and deprogramming fell into my hands;² the shock techniques of mental subjugation as described there were disappointingly similar to the ones that had been administered to me in my role as Johannes.

All these are negative sides and contradictions with which I can live, on second thoughts. Although like any other religion the *sangoma* religion is disgusting in certain respects, it shares with other religions the capacity to occasionally rise above these human limitations; this is concretely manifested in the transformation that

¹ This was written in 1998, trying to render my frame of mind in 1991. It cannot pass without comment in 2002-2003. Of course the attainment of an African ritual status, however publicly acknowledged, cannot have been my final destination at all – it was merely a step in a journey that was to be continued throughout my life, from alienation through alienness to identity and responsibility, in which this book is hopefully another step. See the final sections of the present chapter.

² Sargant 1957. Sargant's pioneering views of mental programming were soon to be criticised by Brown, whose remark below seems to cast an even darker shadow on the psychological implications of my becoming a *sangoma*:

'The whole fallacy about brainwashing (if by this one means that an ideology can be implanted in a person's mind permanently and regardless of his original beliefs or external circumstances) is the peculiar notion implied in Sargant's book *Battle for the Mind* that an idea is a 'thing' located in the brain which can be planted there or dug up at will. (...) In short, neither Aldous Huxley nor Sargant seems to realize that, although the individual may modify his experiences to coincide with his basic personality, the only type of person who holds ideas wholly unrelated to his social environment is a lunatic.' (Brown 1965: 291f).

In other words, Brown would not hesitate to reduce my becoming a *sangoma* to lunacy. Chapter 7, with its affirmation of the proven power of *sangomahood* to extrasensorily produce valid knowledge, was written in response to those sorts of challenges and allegations.

sangomahood had effected in my life (even though it did not go far enough, and reinforced, rather than resolved and dispelled, the infantile conflicts that had dominated my life), and in the capacity for divination and healing that I found in that connection and that, while remaining a source of bewilderment, allows me to detach my *sangomahood* from my own self-contemplation, and to direct it at others, at their request and for their benefit.

6.9. University professor and *sangoma*

The surplus value which *sangomahood* yet holds for me has also been the reason why for a long time I could not bring myself to probe into the epistemological status of my *sangoma* knowledge and of the representations of the supernatural that *sangomahood* entails.¹ Even within the confines of the present chapter I shun from doing so.

On a practical level, in my everyday life (in my consultations, and during my short visits for libations and prayers at the inconspicuous shrine in my back garden in Haarlem, the Netherlands), I engage with the spirits and the powers of the *sangoma* religion as if these really exist, as if they are truly part of the common reality that is open to sense perception. All this suits me fine, it explains (albeit in an idiom that commands neither respectability nor credibility in North Atlantic academic circles – not even from myself when I am in my academic ‘mode’) what I cannot explain otherwise, and produces considerable peace of mind. The Virgin Mary has enjoyed a similar status in my life ever since I was three years old: as taught by my mother at that age, I have always continued to honour the mother of God occasionally with Hail-Maries, especially when scared to death taking off and landing during air travel, but also at moments of the greatest joy. Likewise Sidi Mhammad – the local saint whose tomb and dome-covered chapel constitute the centre of the Tunisian village of the same name where I conducted my first anthropological fieldwork – has for over thirty years been the patron saint of my nuclear family, complete with semi-annual sacrificial meals and more frequent invocations and praises. For nearly two decades I have owed two sacrificial pigs to Mama Jombo, the great territorial spirit and shrine in north-western Guinea-Bissau,² in payment for the birth of my eldest son after I put in a request to this effect. However, this obligation does not really count as a sign of my intercultural religiosity, but is rather due to an error of intercultural communication. I visited Mama Jombo’s shrine in 1983 during fieldwork, and after I had explained the purpose of my visit to the land priest in charge (I wished to investigate the shrine’s

¹ The same reluctance is reiterated in section 5.3. However, chapter 7 was specifically written, almost as an afterthought, in order to confront explicitly the epistemological puzzles implied in my ‘becoming a *sangoma*’, and as such that chapter constitutes, in ways discussed at length there and in the Introduction, a radical departure from my earlier knowledge strategies concerning *sangomahood*, as recounted in chapters 5 and 6.

² Crowley 1990; van Binsbergen, 1988b, 1984b.

activities in the context of indigenous psychiatry), the encouraging answer was that I ‘could ask anything I wanted’; but my scientific questioning was completely misunderstood, for in the shrine context ‘to ask something’ can only mean one thing: not detached anthropological data collection, but to request whatever is your desire in the innermost depth of your heart. When pressed to stop beating about the bush and make my existential request, in the panic of that moment I (until then the father of one, dearly beloved daughter who however had come to be temporarily estranged from me in the context of divorce) could think of nothing better than to stammer ‘a son’. That could easily be arranged, and that would cost a mere two pigs; settlement due as soon as the spirit would press her claim, which would be within an indeterminate period of years possibly decades – I would know when the moment of settlement had come from inexplicable illness and other misfortunes. The moment came while I was compiling and rewriting this book, and I have made arrangements to discharge my obligations.

Bach was a composer of genius, and a very religious person. Admittedly, it has been most liberating, ever since the Enlightenment, to be able to break out of the compelling blackmail of the religious; for us moderns religion is no longer something to be taken for granted nor – we keep telling ourselves – something inescapable. But the Enlightenment’s project is over, and counted are the days of the agnostic imperative as a *precondition* for being taken seriously in the field of religious studies. After intellectuals had confidently and massively turned away from religion in the course of the twentieth century, towards the end of that century religion (often under the new euphemism of ‘spirituality’) has required respectability again.¹ It has become thinkable once again that we constitute ourselves as human beings by our religion.

This does not take away the fact that my private belief in the *sangoma* world view appears to be incompatible with the kind of rationality that is expected from me in most situations as a researcher and as a professor. The separation between private and public (*sangoma* in private, positive scientist in public) offered only a very partial way out here. For as a truly passionate scientist my innermost convictions also seek to be manifest in my pursuit of science. Moreover, on the basis of its therapeutic effectiveness, for myself and for my patients, I have reason to consider the knowledge that I have acquired as a *sangoma* and that I use in my *sangoma* practice, as *valid* knowledge;² then it is far from obvious that I resort to excluding that *sangoma* knowledge, as if it were pseudo-knowledge, from my professional pursuit of science. However, I am very conscious of the fact that I am surrounded by other vocal intellectual producers; they defend epistemological positions in which they have entrenched themselves and which do not allow them too many compromises threatening their intellectual security; these intellectual producers’ perspective never entirely coincides with my own complex combination of being at

¹ Derrida & Vattimo 1996.

² Cf. chapter 7.

the same time an Africanist, anthropologist, intercultural philosopher, and poet. In such an academic environment, there are likely to be limits to the extent to which one can publicly affirm one's *sangomahood* and yet be allowed to live happily ever after as a successful senior academic.

However, these limits have turned out to be surprisingly wide. Out of respect for my position as a professor (contrary to the US, the great majority of European academic staff are ranked lower than professorial) and as a specialist in the field of African religion, and carried by the postmodern wave of anti-positivism that affected the universities around 1990, the level of eccentricity with which I could get away even within the world of science, was alarming high. When I first presented my original account of 'becoming a *sangoma*' to an expert audience of anthropologists specialising in African religion, at the seventh Satterthwaite colloquium on African religion and ritual in 1991, these colleagues' response (with the exception of Richard Werbner's) could not have been more welcoming; it was very clear that I had done and said things that many of them had at least contemplated but had shied away from – and within half an hour after I had distributed copies of the paper, the piece had been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Religion in Africa*. By and large, there have only been five colleagues – most of them prominent in their field, and most of them at least ten years my senior – who have spoken out against my attempt at scientific mediation of my *sangomahood*. These five friends¹ (some of whom have perhaps in the past invested so much time in me as a colleague and a friend that out of a sense of love and responsibility they cannot let me make the wrong professional choices at this point in my life) may rest assured: their negative reactions have given me more food for thought than the many expressions of sympathy and agreement on the part of equally senior and friendly colleagues, and of non-academics. The objections they have insisted on pointing out are far from chimeric, and they have had a serious impact on this chapter and the following two chapters. Pretty soon I found myself discouraging or prohibiting the same attitudes, opinions and modes of analysis in my students that I was myself applying as a *sangoma*.

Apparently the attempt to create a framework within which integrity may be open for discussion does not mean that in all circumstances one has the key to integrity at one's disposal, especially when these circumstances involve interculturality. I therefore went in search of a more objective and controlled academic scientific on my *sangomahood* from which I could mediate whatever I learned as a *sangoma* in publications and research, trying to raise it above the level of an idiosyncratic ego-trip. Since 1998 this opportunity has realised itself in the form of my appointment as a professor of intercultural philosophy. Initially however I chose a way out in the form of historical research – an escape route from personal problematics that I had travelled before,² although not consciously for that purpose, and one that I had seen Matthew Schoffeleers travel. Throughout the 1990s I

¹ Richard Werbner, Robert Buijtenhuijs, Heinz Kimmerle, Ineke van Wetering, and finally Jos van der Klei.

² Van Binsbergen 1981a, 1992b, and forthcoming (c).

channelled the immense desire for knowledge that my *sangomahood* had unchained into a large project that enabled me to retrieve the origin of the *sangoma* oracular tablets and of the oral interpretational scheme that is associated with them. I identified the Southern African form of the oracle as one of the offshoots of the large tree of geomantic divination, that is ramified all over Africa, the Arabic world, the Indian Ocean region, medieval and early modern Europe, and the Black diaspora of the New World. This is a divination system that was developed towards the end of the first millennium CE in or near the Iraqi harbour city of Basra, from a combination of a number of ingredients: the thought of the philosophical community of the Ikhwan al-Safa'a; the millennia-old, variegated (but largely astrological) occult tradition of the Ancient Near East as filtered through the doctrines of the Ikhwan al-Safa'a; the Chinese *I Ching*, that was mediated by the Indian Ocean trade; and probably also influences from African pre-Islamic divination systems.¹ While being absorbed in the extraordinary adventure that took my mind across thousands of years and thousands of kilometres, working on Arabic texts, trying to decode Ancient Babylonian and Egyptian myths and familiarising myself with the parallel histories of other formal systems such as board games and writing systems, I could fool myself into believing that I had neither time nor reason to critically reflect on the apparently unsolvable puzzles of intercultural mediation which my *sangomahood* continued to pose in my personal life. I now must admit that, if my approach to interculturality is to convince, it cannot evade these issues, and that is why I treat them at length in chapters 7 and 8, and in my forthcoming book *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots*.

6.10. A social regime of implicit knowledge acquisition

Another problem posed by my *sangomahood* concerns the specific social regime of knowledge acquisition within the milieu of the *sangoma* lodge.²

The specialist on Sufism, Idries Shah,³ emphasises that esoteric teaching at Sufi lodges, at the feet of a master, is mainly by implication and with amazingly low levels of explicit verbalisation. The same applies to the *sangoma* lodges of Southern Africa, which I suspect share with the Sufis (especially the South Asian branches) more extensive historical roots than just geomantic divination and an ecstatic cult.⁴

My knowledge of *sangomahood* in Francistown is based on a year of fieldwork in 1988-89, followed by research trips of three to six weeks each, one or two times per year, through most of the 1990s. My election as a *twaza* on the grounds of public ancestral ecstasy was in 1990; my graduation as a *sangoma* in 1991. The time

¹ Van Binsbergen 1996b, 1996c, 1995a, 1994d, 1997c, 1996e, 1999f, and forthcoming (d).

² In chapter 7 below I shall proceed beyond the social practices of knowledge acquisition, and explore the more specifically epistemological questions that *sangoma* knowledge raises.

³ Shah 1971.

⁴ Cf. chapter 8, and especially van Binsbergen, forthcoming (d), (e).

reserved for prolonged fieldwork, therefore, had already passed when my breakthrough to *twazahood* occurred. However, I had grappled intensively with ecstatic and therapeutic ritual since 1968, in my research on North African popular Islam and on religious change in pre-colonial Zambia, and over the years I had not only gathered a considerable knowledge of ecstatic phenomena but had developed a great affinity with them. As a result, already in 1989, one year before my becoming a *twaza*, the lodge leaders of Francistown had chosen to treat me – sponsor and companion of my wife, who by then was already active as a *twaza* – not as an outsider to their ecstatic religion, but as a kind of colleague with valid and relevant esoteric knowledge derived from Zambia and other places in Africa.

Soon I was to land in the lodge milieu as a patient who was sincerely looking for remedy, not primarily as a researcher. As is the case for any patient and any *twaza* in the context of the *sangoma* cult, the healing process was at the same time a learning process concerning the internal relationships at the lodge, the terminology, the aetiology of the *sangoma* religion, the *sangoma* world view. At the lodge, in most cases essential knowledge is transmitted in passing, with a few words only, if at all. There is no prolonged formal training except with regard to the divination tablets and their nomenclature. One aspect of this peculiar knowledge regime is that the lodge is multilingual: the leaders have Kalanga as their mother tongue, the other members Ndebele, Sotho, Swati, and a few Zambian languages. Only a small minority of the lodge membership has Tswana as a mother tongue, despite that fact that this language (of which I acquired a limited working knowledge) is Francistown's *lingua franca*. At the lodge Ndebele¹ is the *lingua franca*, but many lodge members know this language, and internal verbal communication is therefore often defective – not just in my case. Initially my ignorance about the details and implications of *sangomahood* was sky-high, and under those conditions I have made many a clumsy or even downright incorrect pronouncement in my first pieces on *sangomahood*, some of which were actually written in the field.² Even as I was being initiated as a *twaza* myself, I did not yet know the difference between a *twaza* and a fully fledged, graduated *sangoma*. In hindsight the effects of this ignorance might easily – but wrongly – be construed as a sign of lack of integrity.

6.11. Public health

In the light of the preceding sections of this chapter, let us assume that my practising *sangoma* therapy in the Netherlands need not be a sign of my lack of integrity. But is it a danger to public health? In the last analysis only a court of law could settle that question, and the reader is very welcome to elicit a test case on this issue. My earlier experiences with the court in the context of *sangomahood*, when I was accused of

¹ A minority language in Botswana, but not in Zimbabwe, and very similar to the other Nguni languages in South Africa: Zulu, Xhosa and Swati.

² Chapter 5 above; moreover: van Binsbergen 1990a, 1999c.

violating CITES regulations as described above, inspire me with hope and confidence in this connection. Despite the fact that only a few score clients are involved and therefore no massive influence on mortality rates needs to be feared, the question has interesting aspects from a point of view of the study of interculturality. For if the inhabitants of the North Atlantic region feel entitled to set Western medicine loose upon the societies of Southern Africa,¹ then it might be simply ethnocentric to suggest that the state should prohibit the duly certified practice of African medicine in the Dutch context – in other words, to suggest that such a practice would be quackery, automatically and under any circumstance.² Freud was a certified physician practising psychotherapy, yet had to defend his followers against the accusation of quackery. Let us hear what he had to say on the topic:

‘Permit me to give the word “quack” the meaning it ought to have instead of the legal one. According to the law a quack is anyone who treats patients without possessing a state diploma to prove he is a doctor. I should prefer another definition: a quack is anyone who undertakes a treatment without possessing the knowledge and capacities necessary for it. Taking my stand on this definition, I venture to assert that – not only in European countries doctors form a preponderating contingent of quacks in analysis. They very frequently practice analytic treatment without having learnt it and without understanding it.’³

Incidentally, since my *sangoma* licence is valid in Botswana I cannot be a quack there, and it is again a question of ethnocentrism or Eurocentrism whether I could then be a quack in the Netherlands.

Apparently my Dutch, African and global clients find that I am offering them something other than quackery. My African teachers found me, demonstrably, an accomplished therapist by their own standards, and have also impressed me with the awareness that ancestral election to the rank of *sangoma* imposes a lifelong obligation to make one’s knowledge and skills available to those clients who request them: people suffering physically, but especially socially and mentally.

6.12. What does *sangomahood* mean to me ?

For me this therapeutic obligation is the real, also political, essence of becoming a *sangoma* and of remaining a *sangoma*.

But:

‘Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?’⁴

¹ And certainly not always with evidently positive results and without negative side-effects, as documented in: cf. Staugård 1985, 1986a, 1986b; Reis 1991, 1992, 1996.

² I no longer endorse this argument, since it is implicitly relativist. I have better arguments for the vindication of *sangomahood*, within a non-relativist, unitary, intercultural theory of truth. See chapter 7 and the Introduction.

³ Freud 1948, 1962: 146.

⁴ John 1: 46.

How is it possible that the African continent, which the rest of the world has virtually written off as far as economics and politics are concerned, may yet offer the inhabitants of other continents additional means to heal themselves? (In the same vein, how is it possible that the very same continent has offered us, globally and via the immensely painful detour of slavery, the major musical expressions of our time: jazz, and all varieties of pop music?) And an important question from the perspective of intercultural philosophy: how can an African idiom of healing invoking beliefs and rituals that are not part of North Atlantic culture, and that are partially incompatible with North Atlantic culture, be therapeutically effective outside Africa?

I did not go to Botswana in 1988 in order to be converted to an African religion, but in order to put an end to a particular phase in my research career (a phase particularly concentrated on rural and urban Zambia) and to begin a new phase – in the context of a new Southern Africa research programme that I had initiated at the African Studies Centre, Leiden. I came back a different person, not very different already in 1989, but certainly in 1990 and 1991. As an Africanist, I have of course always appropriated Africa and African cultural products. But today I no longer engage in such appropriation primarily for the sake of the instrumental value that these things African might have for my career and for North Atlantic science, regardless of the local value that their African creators have consciously imparted to them. Today my appropriation is primarily for the sake of a local African value that I have internalised as an adherent of an African religion, and that I thus help to spread so that it may become part of humankind's general global-culture-in-the-making. In this way I allow things African a great deal of influence on my own life, in recognition of everything I have derived from Africa's inhabitants and their cultures over so many years.

After I have experienced the healing power of African rituals not only as a detached researcher but also as an erring and ailing person, I seek to mediate, in my *sangomahood*, in Africa as well as the Netherlands, a politically liberating and symbolically rehabilitating image of Africa. And while I am doing so, probably I am not strictly speaking healing my patients, but I certainly struggle as a *sangoma* in the course of long sessions in order to find for these patients the ways, pronouncements, perspectives, models of enunciation, a new ordering and interpretation of the facts of their life, by reference to which they may find the power to heal themselves. Probably in the last analysis the truth is this: instead of being healed by me, these clients help me so that I can become whole, healed, by virtue of my immensely tiring and often highly frightening subservience to the problems and the well-being of these other people, who most of the time are and remain utter strangers to me.


In Southern Africa the beads around my neck and my wrists, in the sacred colours red, white and black, have a culturally accepted meaning, and like a priest's dog collar in the North Atlantic region, they give people in Southern Africa the right and the incentive to approach me with their predicaments. I do not solicit them.

Every consultation with my patients is a three-hour struggle with the fear that the powers attributed to me will not manifest themselves this time. In order to diminish

that tension I have taken the habit of specifically preparing myself for a consultation: the day prior to an appointment I pour a libation (a bottle of beer or part of a bottle of wine) on my shrine, and have an initial preparatory divination session in order to preview the client whom usually I have not even seen at this time.

Also the computer offers useful services in this preparation. In the course of years I have explored the internal systematics of the divination system to such an extent that I have been able to rebuild these systematics into a complete computer program.¹ My own oracular tablets were given to me by the lodge leader MmaNdlovu a few days before she died; by that time they were most probably still virgin, powerless dummies (although they already allowed me to conduct many satisfactory divination sessions), but two years later they were consecrated in the blood of the principal sacrificial goat at my graduation as a *sangoma*. Each of the four tablets has distinctive marks, and on each tablet the front and back sides are clearly indicated, so that when all four tablets are cast they can produce 16 (2^4) different combinations. Throwing the tablets constitutes a *random generator* capable of yielding 16 different values. In the computer program this random generator has been replaced by electronically generated aselect numbers. In ordinary four-tablet divination each throw produces one out of the sixteen possible configurations, and that particular configuration² may be interpreted in continuity with previous and subsequent throws of the same session; such interpretation may take place along any of eight different dimensions: kinship, possessions, sorcery, bodily aspects, etc. Making a specific inspired choice from among these dimensions or their combination, the diviner interprets after each throw the resulting combination with an explicit verbal pronouncement which triggers specific reactions in the client. These reactions, consciously and subconsciously taken into account by the diviner, again inform the interpretational choice made for the subsequent throw. From the continued series of throws a coherent story of diagnosis, cause and remedy then gradually arises, in a subtle dialogue with the client who, however, remains largely unaware of his own input into the dialogue, and instead experiences the oracle increasingly as an independent, non-manipulated, truth-producing authority. All these elements have been built into the computer version of the oracle. After an initial, temporary consecration of the computer (by means of a small pinch of snuff, sprinkled onto the ground or onto the hardware as an offering to the shades), and after familiarising the computer with the issue and person at hand by establishing physical contact via the computer mouse, the program produces the same kind of

¹ The program is working adequately now, but for years it has been operating with a defectively programmed random generator that – as I only found out after particularly disappointing sessions – could produce only a limited selection of the choices normally available. This defect was then remedied.

² E.g. the tablets *Kwame* (whence the professional association of healers derives its name), *Shilume* and *Lungwe* open – with their front side up – while *Ntakwala* is closed; this configuration is called *Vuba*, ‘mixture’: . The details of the divining tablets’ interpretative catalogue have been described in van Binsbergen 1994d, 1995a, 1996c, 1996e.

information as the tablets. An additional advantage of the computer would be that certainly there sleight of hand in producing particular desired combinations would be absolutely ruled out, at least under the prevailing technological rationality of mainstream North Atlantic science (see however chapter 7). The main difference between computer and tablets is that the many dimensions of interpretation are much easier to manage on the computer: they can be simultaneously displayed, chosen, remembered, and spun into a meaningful therapeutic narrative, in ways that are much more difficult to achieve orally from sheer memory. Incidentally, some elite clients in Southern Africa prefer the computer over the oracular tablets.

But regardless of whether I use the tablets or the computer, the interpretational freedom that I take as a therapist remains an essential feature of the Southern African system. This freedom is utilised by every local diviner in his own way. Conflict, rivalry, experiences in youth, family histories, anxieties, sexuality, of course play a role in these narratives that are cut to the measure of the individual clients. It is inevitable that in my own practice, eclectically, themes from the more dominant Western therapeutic traditions seep through (especially the psychoanalytical and the Jungian-analytical traditions).

Within the *sangoma* world view it is unusual to distinguish between body, mind and social circumstances. All three dimensions are part of an experience of suffering, which the *sangoma* is supposed to address and redress. Yet I refrain personally from the treatment of somatic complaints. I do not touch the patients except occasionally in order to place the oracular tablets in their hands, so that they may throw for themselves and communicate their aura to the tablets. Without delay, and emphatically, I refer somatic complaints to the physicians competent to deal with them. I limit my own intervention to spiritual and social problems. But even so one might object against my practising an African therapeutic system in the North.

In addition to narratives and directives for specific ritual actions I prescribe nature medicines. These are the pulverised parts of plants (sometimes animals) that I have learned to recognise and collect in the Botswana outdoors, or that – as many Southern African therapists do – I have exchanged with my colleagues or have bought from them. I pulverise this material in my rough cast-iron mortar (bought from my colleagues in the *sangoma* section of the urban market in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe). In Southern Africa several modes of administration are known for these medicines: orally, rectally, sprinkled in shallow incisions in the skin (the constitution of the *sangomas*' professional association is very specific on this point and prohibits incisions deeper than three millimetres), or strictly external, as an addition to bathing water or as a simple application onto the untouched skin. I exclusively prescribe the strictly external usage, not out of fear of a Dutch court of law or medical disciplinary committee, but simply because I have learned to take the toxic properties of Southern African plants very seriously.

Every divination session I hold begins with a lengthy intercultural exposé in order to introduce the client to the world of *sangoma* religion. Every session plunges me, time and again, into the greatest insecurity because I realise only too well that

the powers and existences to which I appeal as a *sangoma* therapist are contested or even denied from the point of view of the scientific rationality that is far from external to my life but on the contrary governs my daily, passionate pursuit of empirical social science, history and intercultural philosophy. Yet practically every time I manage to convince my client of the power of my oracle, through the revelation of real, secret information about the client's life. Admittedly, I derive this information partly from the client's own statements in ways which he or she overlooks, but another part undeniably derives from hunches, inspirations, the vehicle for which consists in my tense, hasty, occasionally desperate reading of the fall of the tablets. Once the client has become convinced of the power of the oracle, the rest of the treatment – and especially the revelatory personal narrative from which I derive directives for the client – acquires a salutary authority that effectively persuades the client to re-order his life and to make it more healthy. This happens in combination with a mode of visualising and naming of causes and remedies in the client's personal sphere by reference to the fall of the tablets – which to the patient is usually refreshingly new and convincingly concrete. In the client's experience the oracle yields factual secret information, and this lends the oracle's interpretative narrative, and subsequent ritual and therapeutic directives, great authority. All this offers the client the subjective awareness of an Archimedean fixed point against which his own doubt, uncertainties and anxieties can be offset; and from that fixed point he can pull himself up towards a new healthy, active and confident confrontation of life's problems.

For myself, however, the significance of *sangomahood* reaches further than these therapeutic sessions. For more than a quarter of a century I have roamed from being a poet to being a positivist anthropological researcher, then a Marxist, then a *sangoma* cum professor of anthropology, and finally, most recently, an intercultural philosopher. Becoming a *sangoma* meant that in a tangible way I was reminded of the possibility of transformation that I had longed for throughout my life, and in my most essential capacities (as a husband, as a father, as my parent's child, as my siblings' brother, as an Africanist researcher, as a teacher, and as a poet).

In retrospect the transformation which I thought I had reached by becoming a *sangoma* in the early 1990s, required another ten years to mature, and it remained only partial, unfinished. In the process I was to learn that in certain respects my *sangomahood* was a way, not of overcoming the infantile conflicts of my childhood, but of submitting to them. From the dilemmas of my past, from my training to become an anthropologist, from the practice of my prolonged fieldwork spells in various places in Africa, and from manipulative and boundary-effacing practices that I witnessed there (not so much because Africa is different but simply because I watched differently, more closely, there than at home), I have for a long time derived the impression that the multivocal nature of the human reality and of its ethics precludes or eclipses the possibility of truth and integrity in anything but the most relative sense. The naïve positivist scientific ideal of my first fieldwork declined and faded away more or less along with my relationship with my first wife, an

experimental physicist who, ten years my senior, had an enormous impact on my formation as an empirical researcher. I discovered that the motor of my unmistakable scientific passion was libidinous: not a detached, contemplating fascination for a reality out there, but an appropriative transference, onto the world of academic research, of unconscious conflicts in myself, conflicts that propelled me to distant places in order to seek there a trespassing and subsequent acceptance across apparently impassable boundaries. Thus I denied for my own research activities (however comprehensive and successful) the exalted status of an objective pursuit of truth; instead, I exposed them for the libidinous acts they were at least in part. For many years in the 1980s and early 1990s, I tried to play down scientific knowledge production as a trivial undertaking whose results were at best socially determined constructs as cynical, market-directed strategic choices within an essentially arbitrary paradigmatic merry-go-round incapable of producing truth. One could say that this was a typically naïve, anthropologist's version of the relativist Kuhnian position in the Popper–Kuhn controversy.¹ After all, was I not primarily a poet, and was I not primarily someone trying to do justice not to objective data but to the multivocality of the network of social relationships in which I had to engage in the course of my doing anthropological fieldwork? The objective scientific report, cast in predictable and dull ready-to-wear prose, was not doing any justice to either of these two self-imposed identities and commitments: those of the poet, and those of myself as the interaction partner of (other?) Africans.

In this dead end of lost motivation and thwarted libidinous passion, becoming a *sangoma* meant a decisive moment of both truth and integrity. Surrendering myself finally, and then rather unconditionally, to an African idiom, contained the promise that ultimately I may yet be redeemed from the original sin inherent in African Studies; that original sin consists of the horrible reduction of Africa to a passive object of study that is subservient to our own North Atlantic careers, to our North Atlantic construction of knowledge, and ultimately to the projects of Eurocentrism, European expansion, and North Atlantic hegemony. Tracing, in the course of the last ten years of more passionate and captivating research than I have ever before enjoyed, the unexpected connections of the *sangoma* divination system through six millennia and all across the Old World, and recognising, beyond merely divination, also the other aspects of *sangoma* spirituality and symbolism as localised transformations of the worldwide and extremely old cultural complex of shamanism, is no longer an act of escape, appropriation, and home-seeking, but of love, a celebrating of universal humanity and its achievements.² Being a *sangoma* at the same time entails a creative handling of immensely powerful symbols, which promise an even greater power of life and death than the verbal elements that I was (and still am) using as a poet. Being a *sangoma* opens up for me the possibility of a

¹ Barnes 1982; Kuhn 1962, 1977; Lakatos & Musgrave 1970; Popper 1959.

² The implications of this position are set out in chapters 7 and 8.

non-egotistic, not primarily libido-driven, servitude to the suffering of others, which to some extent redeems me from myself and from my own past.

My practice as a *sangoma* is not limited to my dealings with my clients. The transformative process that reached a new phase with my becoming a *sangoma* has not ended there. My regular prayers and libations at my shrine articulate moments of crisis and triumph in my personal life, where I am still struggling to escape from the burden of my childhood, re-sensitise the scar tissue this has left in my soul, and prevent this burden from crushing my relations with my beloved ones. Here *sangomahood* offers the powerful device of being able to address my deceased parents and other forebears directly, propitiating them and bringing them to rest in myself. Readers familiar with Jungian psychology may recognise in my key encounters with the spiritual as a *sangoma*, manifestations of the *anima* breaking through from the unconscious, or traces of the joined archetypes of the hero and his mother.¹ My first, spontaneous inclination was to submit to these manifestations and to give them a conscious and manifest place in my life; but I have meanwhile learned (and not from *sangomahood*) that the unconscious is not supposed to dwell above the surface, that the *anima* merely surfaces as an admonition to confront her and to relegate her back down to where she belongs, and this is what my ministrations at my shrine assist me in doing, half a century after the seeds of both unconditional submission to, and rebellion against, the *anima* were planted in my soul. In this process, becoming a *sangoma* was not enough to take me to any final destination, but it set me onto the right track.

6.13. Integrity as intercultural risk

In the last analysis, integrity does not lie in the static parallel existence, one next to one another, of alternatives, but in the moment when out of the available alternatives, effectively, with force, and in the full awareness of the risk of disfigurement and pain, a compelling choice is made. For me *sangomahood* has meant such a choice: in favour of a messy, often disquieting and threatening, Africa-centred celebration of fellow-humanity, and in favour of the attending, equally messy and contradictory ideas concerning the supernatural which make up the *sangoma* religion; and against the objectification, the condescending and hegemonic North Atlantic scientific production concerning African people – a production whose contents is often so very defective, and whose form is often ugly. For me as an established researcher this implies – at least socially and collegially – a risk of disfigurement. It is an open question whether I will continue to get away with this intellectual stance, or whether, alternatively, my Africanist colleagues will condemn me to some sort of mental or collegial ‘early retirement’ – after all, quite a few of these colleagues are becoming (for reasons that I can understand but have no sympathy with) ever more positivist, ever more proudly ignorant of African

¹ Jung 1974b: Part II ch. ii, and 1987.

languages and cultural idioms, ever more saturated with the staccato rhythm of North Atlantic hegemonic complacency in their knowledge production concerning Africa.

In 1990 I cried violently and publicly, for relief and joy, at the end of my initiation into *twazahood*, in the presence of hundreds of inhabitants of the Monarch suburb.

‘His grandfather urgently wants a gun’ ...

as MmaDlozi diagnosed the situation in concrete terms. Even more violently I cried in 1991 after my final graduation when, in private, I was reproached for not having prayed *in Dutch* upon the shrine of the maternal ancestors of MmaChakayile –

‘for didn’t I know that there I was supposed to pray not to her ancestors but to my own?’

In accordance with the dynamics of knowledge transfer at the lodge such as set out above, no one had told me, of course. And so it was only immediately after graduation that I understood, suddenly and in full blow, that my becoming a *sangoma* was meant as a homecoming, not in Botswana in a *sangoma* lodge but in a Dutch ancestral home whose relevance to me I had always denied, for what I thought were excellent reasons. It was to take at least another decade before I realised that these ancestors were metaphors for the past, and that there could be no other home for me than here and now, in the little wind-swept cubicle of closeness, love and trust shared with my wife and children. And if only in the past few years I am finally beginning (or so I believe) to live up to the promises that *sangomahood* seemed to bring within reach, it has been by a combination of both remaining a *sangoma*, of transforming this African institution to a global format as set out in the next chapter, and of spiritually reaching beyond *sangomahood*, closing the abyss of infantile conflicts and of the unquenchable longing they produced in me, and refusing to press Africa and Africans any more into service as part of my neurotic strategies of self-construction, or rather, desperate survival. Little wonder that in the process I have strayed to the very fountain whence *sangomahood* drew much of its inspiration: the techniques of auto-hygiene available in South Asian Hinduism and Buddhism.

Integrity does not appear as some pre-existing quality (defined either within Western culture or in some culture-free manner), to be subsequently introduced into intercultural mediation as an accessory resource. Integrity does not even primarily appear as the touchstone for the success or failure of such intercultural mediation. Integrity (or at least, such integrity as one may claim to pursue without, circularly, damaging that very integrity by the suggestion of having attained it!) appears as something even more fundamental: as the eminently risky result that in itself will never be realised and brought home – *as the result consisting in the big, disfiguring scars and the violent phantom pains of the halfling who misses one side of his body* – but nevertheless a result that is being promised right at the very boundaries between cultures, promised in ways that are simply impossible within the complacent confines of just one culture.

Although I was the first Ph.D. to be produced by Matthew Schoffeleers, I have not been his student to such an extent as to make it likely that the gradual but unmistakable convergence between us, with regard to attempted integrity in the midst of intercultural risk, might have resulted from his example as a supervisor. But I recognise the way he went, and I admire him for it.