

Intercultural encounters

Cover illustration: Janiform headdress mask, Ekoi, Nigeria. Wood and antelope skin, height 40 cm.
The British Museum, London (Trowell n.d.: 62).

For *addenda et corrigenda*, background information, index covering the notes, Authors' index, and other details concerning this book, see: http://www.shikanda.net/intercultural_encounters/index.htm

to Patricia, with all my love

si tacuisses, philosophus mansisses

(‘if you had not spoken out, no one would
have noticed that you are not a philosopher’)

Cf. Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, 2, 17



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Intercultural encounters

African and anthropological lessons towards
a philosophy of interculturality

Wim van Binsbergen

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Introduction

0.1. African and anthropological lessons towards a philosophy of interculturality

This book brings together fifteen essays investigating aspects of interculturality. It operates at the borderline between two disciplines:

- anthropology (in which field I was trained at Amsterdam University, took a Ph.D. at the Free University (Amsterdam) in 1979, occupied various professorial chairs, and in the years 1980-1990 served as one of the scientific directors at the African Studies Centre, Leiden); and
- intercultural philosophy, in which field I have occupied a chair at Erasmus University in Rotterdam since 1998.

I seek to make, with this book, a contribution to intercultural philosophy, by formulating with the greatest possible precision and honesty the lessons my extensive intercultural experiences as an anthropologist have taught me.

The kaleidoscopic nature of intercultural experiences is reflected in the diversity of these fifteen texts. Many belong to a field that could be described as ‘meta-anthropology’, others are more clearly philosophical; occasionally they spill over into belles lettres, ancient history, and comparative cultural and religious studies. The ethnographic specifics supporting the arguments are diverse. They derive from three of the African situations in which I have conducted participatory field research as an anthropologist: the North African highlands of Khumiriya (north-western Tunisia); urban and rural life of the Nkoya people of Zambia; and healing cults in urban Botswana. My fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau (1983) is not specifically represented in any of the chapters,¹ and the discussion of the globalisation of

¹ Yet my work in Guinea-Bissau was in many ways a preparation for the present book. It was during that fieldwork that I crossed for the first time the line separating objectifying knowledge production, and personal participation, by becoming a patient of local healers. In 1985 I was invited to give seminars on my Guinea-Bissau experience at the Research Unit Symbol and Symptom, Africa Research Centre, Catholic University Louvain, Belgium, and the discussions there, under the stimulating chairmanship of my long-standing friend and colleague René Devisch, were to have a deep and lasting impact on my anthropological practice.

Southern African thought and society in chapter 14 reflects not only my extensive Botswana fieldwork and my theoretical work on globalisation, but also my shorter excursions into South African and Zimbabwean society over the years. In chapters 1, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10 and 14, problems of interculturality are discussed within specific local African contexts. However, other chapters have a non-localised theoretical focus (chapters 2, 12, 15), deal with the whole of Africa (chapters 4, 8, 11, 13), or start with a local African context and expand the argument so as to encompass long-ranging continuities in space and time (chapters 7, 8). More than thirty years separate the oldest piece (chapter 1) from the more explicitly philosophical pieces that have been written in the last few years; in between is a series of papers written in the late 1980s to late 1990s and addressing an intercultural problematic while still largely relying on anthropological, as distinct from philosophical, conceptual and analytical resources.

How do these separate pieces together present an argument on interculturality? Let us review the four constituent Parts of this book one by one.

0.1.1. Introducing Part II: The construction of intercultural knowledge through anthropological fieldwork

After the Preliminaries of Part I, Part II presents anthropological research as a mode – until recently it was, for nearly a century, the privileged, if not only mode – of intercultural knowledge production by specialists identifying with the North Atlantic region.

The oldest piece (chapter 1) simply evokes the classic practice of anthropological fieldwork as a standard procedure in such knowledge production. It introduces themes that will remain with us throughout Parts II and III: the dependence of intercultural knowledge on personal relations between the subject seeking knowledge and the community whose, or about which, knowledge is being sought; and the way in which knowledge production is intimately related to the personal history and psyche of the producer. In chapter 1, written in 1969 soon after my first fieldwork, the problem of scientific knowledge production is certainly touched upon – after all, anthropological fieldwork had been presented to us, as students of that generation, as an agonising but superior method for the production of valid intercultural knowledge. Yet such methodological concerns merely appear here as problems within North Atlantic social science which in itself is taken for granted. They scarcely stand out yet as problems of *interculturality*. Interculturally, my central conscious problem then was to survive under the onslaught of the other society. It is only in the last weeks of the fieldwork, when the project can no longer shipwreck, that the hosts as described in this piece regain something of their own true humanity and begin to stand out as suffering human beings – but which twenty-one year old, desperately seeking to realise the splendidly Faustian intellectual career that will make him forget his childhood suffering and at the same time live up to his mother's exalted expectations, would have done much better? I have taken my ironic distance from the pathetic and irritating budding professional anthropologist in my

novel *Een buik openen* (1988) – doing justice to the beauty, the humanity, the hospitality, the tenderness, of my Tunisian hosts – long before I could unmask him epistemologically, in the present book.

Chapter 2, which concentrates on the work of the French Marxist anthropologist Pierre-Philippe Rey, makes it clear that already in 1979 I had woken up, in practice although not yet in terminology, to the project of intercultural philosophy, seeking to formulate – in the Marxist idiom of the time, which had informed the theoretical framework of my first major book *Religious change in Zambia* (1979, 1981) – a ‘theory of the peripheral class struggle’: one that could bring out the hegemonic assumptions, and the exploitative and subjugating relations of production, surrounding the practice of anthropology, as the then dominant form of intercultural knowledge production.

The concept of ‘hegemony’ refers to the political, ideological, economic and military processes by which, in the interaction between social groups or categories, one social group or category effectively reduces – often to practically zero – the possibilities of other social groups or categories for defining their own goals, priorities, destiny, and for realising those. The dominant group or category makes instead the other social groups or categories subservient to the realisation of the goals, priorities, destinies, of the dominant group. In Greek Antiquity, hegemony was exclusively conceived in terms of the military, political and economic relations between city states, particularly Sparta and Athens. In the course of the twentieth century CE,¹ partly as a result of Gramsci’s work,² the concept has widened so as to stress ideological factors and to apply to groups and categories typically wider than the nation state (for example North Atlantic hegemony, White hegemony, male hegemony, technocratic hegemony, the hegemony of the capitalist mode of production). Foucault reminded us once more of the fact – well-known to generations of anthropologists and historians – that hegemonic relationships at the macro-level (for example North Atlantic hegemony over the global society and economy) are reflected, implemented, realised, in intimate personal relationships, for example between masters and servants, men and women, teachers and students. Knowledge production is never neutral but either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic,

¹ My systematic use of CE and BCE to calibrate dates even when the period of reference is manifest, is no mere affectation. In the first place, most of my readers will not be historians. In the second place, taking one’s own perspective for granted is a most common but also a most detestable geopolitical and hegemonic strategy, whereas we need to develop – with the assistance of intercultural philosophy – a sense not only for the universal and perennial, but also for the ephemeral and accidental, in our own statements as well as in those of others. In the third place, my usage calls attention to the fact that the ‘Christian’ or ‘Common’ Era (CE) is a hegemonic North Atlantic concept whose particularism we should not dissimulate. For the great majority of people in the contemporary world, the traditional (and most probably erroneous) year of birth of the founder of Christianity is an unlikely and irrelevant calibration point for time reckoning. As is the case with so many hegemonic concepts, this calendrical concept reveals its hegemonic nature precisely by its unfounded but taken-for-granted claim to universality.

² Gramsci 1975, 1977.

Chapter 0

i.e. reinforcing a particular hegemonic structure, or seeking to explode that structure.¹

In chapter 3 (1984) I find myself caught in the aesthetic contemplation of the dialectics between thou and I at the girl's initiation rite of the Zambian Nkoya, a stance that renders problematic my major identities as a Westerner,² an adult male, and an anthropological observer meant to return to my North Atlantic home after a spell of fieldwork. Like the concentric scales that make up the body of an onion, these layers are analysed, and cut away, one after the other, and in the process we learn a great deal about Nkoya sexuality – ending up with the stalemate of an intercultural promise unfulfilled.

Chapter 4 continues the line of chapter 2 when, almost a decade later, with greater complexity and with a less narrowly neo-Marxist anthropological analysis, I reflect on the future of anthropology in Africa, identify the strengths and the weaknesses of the anthropological model of knowledge production through fieldwork, and pinpoint the assumptions of inequality on which that model is based. The extensive Postscript by which I seek to bring this piece up to date, makes it clear that others at the time have felt the crisis in anthropological production in similar ways as I did, and that in the one and a half decades elapsed since, some advances have been made to counter the inequalities in which that crisis originated. I did not wait for anthropology to remedy itself: the crisis proceeded in me a highly idiosyncratic response to be detailed in Part III.

The descriptive fieldwork chapters 1 and 3 vividly convey the complexity and perplexity of intercultural encounters 'in vivo'. But they do more than document a particular mode of intercultural knowledge production. In essence they are about the agony produced by the naïve knowledge model employed in classic anthropology. On the basis of this model, anthropological fieldwork dictates total immersion and extreme adaptation in the field: a mimicry that amounts to the virtual prohibition on the fieldworker's mediating, in the fieldwork situation, her³ own and innermost self

¹ Cf. Bernal 1994; Comaroff & Comaroff 1992; Csordas 1988; Foucault 1963, 1973, and in Rabinow 1984; Geschiere 1986; Semmes 1992; Winant 1994.

² Established usage disregards the cardinal directions and ignores the Eurocentric implications implied in fixing to a particular geographical position what is in essence a relative standpoint; e.g. by the shortest route, Europe is east for the Americas, and the North Atlantic region as a whole is east for Japan and China. Yet for convenience's sake I follow this usage and write 'Western', 'Westerner', to denote the hegemonically-inclined cultural traditions of the North Atlantic region especially Europe. In this connection, the opposite of Western would be South or Southern, and by implication Western itself may become North, Northern. I reserve 'western' and the other three directions, written without initial capital letter, to denote mere geographical position, unless the word is part of a proper name, e.g. Western Province (formerly Barotseland), an officially designated province in western Zambia. For the subdivision of continents however I follow established usage again and write South Asia, not south Asia.

³ I am aware that anthropologists come in two genders. But since anthropology is a discipline to which women have greatly contributed from the beginning, and since many of the dilemmas inherent in the anthropologist's role remind us of similar dilemmas in women's roles in many societies including the North Atlantic one, I will often defy the shortcomings of the English language by implying a female gender for the anthropologist.

as constructed throughout the previous years of her life before fieldwork. The rationale of this model is the assumption that:

- (1) living (or rather *emulating*) other people's lives is an adequate way of learning about their life and how they structure it,

to such an extent that

- (2) given only the proper methods, it is possible to arrive at an analytical, distant, textual (or cinematographic, or using any other medium as the case may be) representation of what constitutes other people's lives – a representation that is essentially without distortion, free from projections, transferences,¹ one-sided impositions and omissions, on the part of the representer.

Assumption (1) is reasonable and commendable – it is good and human to live with the people, to learn their language, to share their moments of joy and grief over a longer period and to compensate, by emphatic signs of identification, for the fact that somatically, socially, in terms of class position, in terms of power and income, in terms of the temporariness and the escapability of membership of the local community, the fieldworker stands out – in the eyes of the host group – as the utter stranger² in most situations and practically throughout her fieldwork. But, naïvely and with the blatant lack of erudition typical of the social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century, assumption (2) goes against the grain of all accumulative hermeneutical investigation in philosophy over the past two centuries. However effective our threshold-lowering mimicry as under (1), yet the representation as under (2) will always and necessarily remain defective and distortive. *Therefore the*

However, it is only fair to revert to the male gender when discussing myself as a fieldworker, or the peculiarities of fieldworkers in general.

¹ Kovel 1978: 311f gives the following useful definitions of these mechanisms:

‘Transference: the conscious repetition of a past situation in a present situation. The concept has been strictly defined for psychoanalysis, in which vis-à-vis the therapist a transference version is developed of the original juvenile neurosis, which is then overcome in this way. But the concept of transference is applicable to any therapeutic situation – and in fact to any situation in which differences in power play a role.

Projection: a defence mechanism whereby subjective characteristics are attributed to the objective world, as when we are angry at someone yet experience that person to be angry with us. Projection may or may not correspond with the truth; what counts is the role they play in the falsification of consciousness.’

From a more specifically Freudian perspective, in all such situations psychic energy may be said to be bound by a past conflict, while the more or less compulsive, symbolic re-enacting of that conflict, as a sign of neurosis, partially releases such energy in a way that is experienced as gratificatory, in other words *libidinous*. Although in everyday language the libidinous has come to be equated with the sexual, usually such re-enacting and release have no manifest sexual connotations.

² Notably, as a ‘Sacred Outsider’, as I shall characterise the situation of the *sangoma* and other ritual structural strangers in my forthcoming book *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots* – the overflow of what I could not accommodate for reasons of space and thematic unity in chapter 8.

professionalisation of anthropological fieldwork, turning it into the sole hallmark of the accomplished anthropologist (with all the disdain this implies vis-à-vis the museum anthropologist and the ‘armchair anthropologist’, whose main data set is an accumulative collection of localised, processed data, and not the amorphous, personal, utterly idiosyncratic field situation), *is largely based on an epistemological fallacy*. Given the power relations that surround anthropological fieldworkers (typically doctoral students and postdocs in the first, insecure and dependent half of their academic careers, desperately fighting for greater security and independence), they cannot make light with the expectations of total immersion and complete loss of self that senior, powerful colleagues impose upon them with a mixture of sincerity and sadism. Yet the problems of interculturality, in knowledge production, as well as in living together or any other human activity, are not solved by pretending to assume the other’s identity, but by finding ways of negotiating one’s own identity *and* the other’s in a jointly constructed new situation for which neither of the two identities has fully prepared either of the participants in that new situation – the solution, in other words, lies in creative innovation negotiating between the various inputs and building them into a new, usually ephemeral, cultural product.

For ethnography this means that the claims of authenticity and validity based on successful and prolonged participation must be doubted just as much as the claims of reliability based on extensive, objectifying use of a quantitative, statistical method. The only kind of ethnography that could claim some intercultural validity would be an intersubjective one in which the ethnographer works closely together, not so much with her academic colleagues, but with her hosts, not only in the field (that is understood) but especially *subsequently*, during write-up, publication, distribution and marketing of the written product.¹

Far from taking anthropological procedures and perspectives for granted, the chapters in Part II seek to express whatever is left unexpressed and unanalysed, in established academic anthropology, in relation to the interaction between the researcher and the researched in knowledge production. These chapters explore the epistemological, political and existential dimensions that open up once an anthropological fieldworker tries to take seriously both the professional prescripts for fieldwork, and the perceptions, values and beliefs of the host society. These two commitments turn out to be largely incompatible. In these pieces the researcher is inevitably taken where, professionally, he has been told he has no business to go, and where therefore professional anthropology neither helps him to survive, nor escape from.

¹ This is the model that informed the production of my main book on the Nkoya people so far, *Tears of Rain*; cf. van Binsbergen 1992b: Preface and chapter 2, for a discussion of the interactive participatory methods making this more than just my own book. A locally affordable Zambian edition was published in 1995 with the generous assistance of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands.

The pieces brought together in Parts II (and to some extent those in Part III) convey the message that the production of anthropological knowledge through participatory fieldwork is problematic, for a number of reasons including:

- the idiosyncratic nature of the researcher's experience in the field;
- the extent to which that experience is influenced by transference from the researcher's individual past – repressed infantile conflicts and desires that inform the contact with the local participants and thus partly determine the flow of ethnographic information and conceptualisation;¹
- the political, social and economic inequalities attending most interactions between representatives of the North and the South;
- the ethical problematic of temporarily imposing on a host community by means of the appropriation of local idioms of sociability (trust, friendship, love, kinship, belief, ritual), but for the sake of what ultimately appears to be merely an instrumental, Northern-driven and (from the point of view of the host society) centrifugal quest for the appropriation of local knowledge.

At the same time these fieldwork situations yet appear to produce intercultural knowledge of such detail, such depth, such validity as recognised by the hosts themselves, that one would not give up participatory fieldwork as a method despite the many pitfalls.

The fact that these problems are addressed by reference to my own successive field experiences might give the reader the impression that my situation has been unique. I think this is not the case. Numerous researchers in the field of religious anthropology have identified closely with the beliefs they initially merely came to study. A fair number of anthropologists have been initiated into a local ritual status, including René Devisch, Matthew Schoffeleers, K. Fidaali, R. Jaulin, Paul Stoller.² Their experiences have often been presented, even by themselves, as simple strategies of adaptation in the field. This view rendered their claims acceptable in professional circles, especially for as long as they remained confined to off-the-record conversations in the common room of anthropology departments and did not appear in print. However, when a researcher has claimed 'real' occult experiences and a personal belief in their reality and effect, like Paul Stoller, he has had hell to

¹ Recognising such transference and the way it reduces the hosts into instruments of the fieldworker's neurotic attempts at self-realisation, I obviously take a distance now from those passages in Parts II and III that appear to present the pursuit of Africanist fieldwork as, *primarily*, the researcher's construction of self. At the expense of making myself unusually vulnerable I have sought to indicate from autobiographical data how such construction of self, although it may yield insights of great profundity and rarity, yet threatens to corrupt the pursuit of fieldwork as an intercultural encounter and as a valid form of knowledge construction. I might have decided to leave these chapters out of this book. However, their inclusion was imperative in order to demonstrate the dangers, but also the possibilities, of intercultural knowledge construction, and the way in which intercultural philosophy may guide us here.

² Fidaali 1987; Jaulin 1971; Stoller & Olkes 1987; Devisch 1978, 1989; on Schoffeleers see chapter 6.

pay.¹ The strongest and most extensive claim of occult experiences in recent anthropology, that by Carlos Castaneda,² is at the same time the most ridiculed and contested.³

The contradictions informing the arguments in Part II are manifest. The chapters' message is that these contradictions cannot be resolved within an anthropological discourse. They pose a problem whose solution is suggested to lie in the formulation of a philosophy of interculturality, one that allows us to think through the situations of intercultural knowledge production within the wider context of intercultural social interaction, and that acknowledges the topicality of this problematic in the contemporary world of economic, political and cultural globalisation. Thus regarded, these chapters do not just deal with the fine points of professional methodology among anthropologists – they present a number of laboratory situations of interculturality, in all their contradictory complexity; and that, I submit, is their main claim to relevance in the context of this book.

A recurrent theme in these papers is that social relations are not entered into without engagement, without consequences. Especially if these relations, between the seeker of intercultural knowledge and the host community about which knowledge is being sought, are deliberately modelled after the models of close, reciprocal relationships current in the host society. Knowledge, of people and their socio-cultural practices, therefore, implies social and political commitment on the part of the acquirer of intercultural knowledge. Intercultural knowledge production (since it reflects the hegemonic structure of the modern world) is a risky process involving either the affirmation or the destruction of the Other's value and identity. Taken literally and to its extreme implications, the anthropological method for the production of intercultural knowledge balances between the Scylla of dehumanising objectification of the community studied (destruction of the Other, for example by *etic* imposition of alien, North Atlantic analytical models producing merely a spurious illusion of local knowledge), and the Charybdis of complete identification (destruction of the knowing subject and her scientific research programme, notably by 'going native' in a total affirmation of the *emic*). These chapters offer examples of both dangers embedded in an extensively described participatory practice.

I have just used the conceptual pair of *etic* and *emic* – one of the most powerful tools of social anthropology. In chapter 15 I will introduce these concepts in the following terms:

emic and *etic* express the distinction between an internal structuring of a cultural orientation such as is found in the consciousness of its bearers, on the one hand, and, on the other, a structuring that is imposed from the outside. *Etic* has nothing to do with ethics in the sense of the philosophy of the judgement of human action in terms of good and evil. Pike's terminology is based on a linguistic analogy. In linguistics one approaches the description of speech sounds

¹ Cf. Olivier de Sardan 1988.

² C. Castaneda 1968, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1977; cf. de Mille 1976, 1980; Murray 1979.

³ With chapter 7 I may place myself in a similar position.

from two complementary perspectives: that of phonetics (hence *-etic*), which furnishes a purely external description, informed by anatomical and physical parameters, revolving on the air vibrations of which the speech sounds consist; and the perspective of phonology, whose basic unit of study is the phoneme (adjective: 'phonemic', hence *-emics*): the smallest unit of speech sound that is effectively distinguished by language users competent in a particular language, basing themselves on the distinctive features of that speech sound. (...) Pike thus codified the two-stage analytical stance (both *etic* and *emic*) of the classic anthropology that had emerged in the second quarter of the twentieth century with such proponents as Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Griaule and Leiris.'

0.1.2. Introducing Part III: From anthropological fieldworker in Southern Africa, to North Atlantic diviner-priest: An experiment in intercultural philosophy

At one point in my researcher's career, it turned out that the only way in which I could cope with the contradictions of my professional and existential situation was to join the Southern African ecstatic healing cult that formed part of my study object in the town of Francistown, Botswana. Thus I effectively became a *sangoma* diviner-priest. Part III of the book is entirely devoted to this somewhat exceptional response to the methodological and theoretical problems of anthropological fieldwork.

In the light of the critique of anthropological fieldwork as a method of intercultural knowledge production, it is clear that the agony underlying my 'becoming a *sangoma*' was in the first place a professional one (although my discussion does allow glimpses of a more individual psychological problematic that exacerbated the professional one shared, in principle, with my anthropological colleagues). In my professional education, I had learned to ignore the hermeneutic chasm between the represented (the people and their cultural orientation) and the representer (myself), and instead to comfort myself with the warmth of sociability as a honorary and temporary, but active, member of local African communities. Contrary to such expectations, the Francistown people largely rejected me in my role of fieldworker because they could not forget that historically I was to them foremost an Afrikaner (a White, Afrikaans-speaking Boer in Southern Africa), and hence a hereditary enemy. This response could only have the effect of destroying my professional habitus, and of reviving all the lifelong insecurities and infantile conflicts that I had so far managed to keep covered under the carpet of my successful intellectual identity. Deep and great historical pain had forced people in Southern Africa to call the fieldworker's bluff. This was 1988-89, almost two hopeless years away from Nelson Mandela's release from his South African prison cell.

In chapter 3, in the discussion of Nkoya female puberty ceremonies, cultural boundaries, although hurtful, still managed to produce a delicate balance between the researched and the researcher, and to keep intact the conventions of anthropological fieldwork as an obvious method of intercultural knowledge production, to be taken for granted. But not for long. In subsequent years, covered by chapters 5 and 6, I allowed myself to be captured as a patient of Southern African *sangomas*. I recognised in myself a strong desire for the *sangomas*' spiritual technology and local status and power. Moreover I adopted a political stance that

made me see in local ritual and belief an idiom of sociability whose rejection by an outsider like myself could only reinforce, instead of redress, the distress and pain which North Atlantic conquest has brought to Southern Africa. The third reason to become and remain a *sangoma* has been epistemological: I have reason to suspect (as set out in detail in chapter 7) that the North Atlantic truth in these matters – to be summarised as

‘African gods do not exist, and African divination is merely clever impression management’

– is just a local, parochial, Eurocentric and ethnocentric home truth.¹ I came to be increasingly convinced that *sangomahood* constitutes an independent access to valid forms of knowledge, even though that African ritual specialism relies on divination, other forms of ancestral intervention, and witchcraft beliefs, neither of which – from the perspective of North Atlantic scientifically-underpinned common sense – could readily correspond with any empirical reality. The fourth reason for my becoming and remaining a *sangoma* lies in the dynamics of interpersonal therapeutic relations such as I have engaged in throughout the years as a *sangoma*, not only in Southern Africa, but also transforming that mode of therapy so as to be able to administer a globalised format of *sangoma* therapy worldwide, by means of personal consultations and more recently predominantly through electronic mail. In this continued practice I am constantly forced to admit that *sangoma* divination does produce valid knowledge which is acknowledged by my clients and then lends such an aura of revelatory truth to my subsequent therapeutic directions that many clients are able to step out of earlier impasses in their life and at long last release their own powers of self-redefinition and regeneration. In other words, I have found in *sangomahood* something that works, and that, at least in my hands and after the transformations I have effected upon it, also works beyond the cultural context in which I initially found it – it has turned out to work *interculturally* among inhabitants of the North Atlantic, regardless of somatic characteristics or cultural background, and even among non-believers and sceptics.

Like Part II, Part III largely consists of a researcher’s self-reflexive account of his own procedures of knowledge construction. Here a familiar problem arises: that of introspection. In fieldwork, the anthropologist is her own principal instrument of research. Introspection therefore – although often² considered a suspect source of knowledge – would be the most appropriate method of elucidating these problems. I use this method extensively in this book. However, given the enormous influence, upon intercultural knowledge production through anthropological fieldwork, of idiosyncratic autobiographical contingencies and of transference, the discussion of these procedures of knowledge production forces one to dissect rationally and

¹ Harding 1997, cf. 1994; also section 15.5, and van Binsbergen 2001c, 2002b, 2002c.

² But not always on good grounds, and not unanimously; on the contrary, throughout the history of philosophy introspection has led to brilliant lasting contributions, to which such names are attached as Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, Augustine, Descartes, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Ryle, etc. Cf. Dalmiya 1993.

objectifying one's own contradictory roles, strategies and identities – to the point of indecent exposure. There are social and aesthetic limits to the extent to which one can do this in print; and I may already have overstepped those.

A remarkable tension may be observed in the accounts of my experiences as an anthropological fieldworker: even with the best techniques of participant observation, applied with the most painful stringency and self-denial, the promise of merging between me and the other, as contained in the naïve anthropological epistemology, is never fulfilled – since the interpretative distance all the time eclipses the existential encounter precisely when the latter is at its most effective. Apparently in an attempt to resolve this contradiction symbolically, scattered over these accounts is the recurrent image (with tragic echoes of my own childhood) of a *hieros gamos* – a sacred marriage of mythical dimensions (for example between heaven and earth, sun and moon, the North Atlantic and the South) that is amply prepared and negotiated yet never consummated. In chapter 1¹ it is the young fieldworker's serene contemplation of the young and happily married Najma bint Hassuna, proud mother of four children and proud adept of the cult of the local shrine of Sidi Mhammad. In chapter 3 it is the slightly older fieldworker's serene contemplation of the budding Nkoya girl dancing the coming-out dance that marks her attainment of nubility. In chapter 5 it is the significantly older fieldworker's serene contemplation of Jane Sinombe, learner typist, and daughter of the distant high priest who a year later would oversee the decisive final steps in my 'becoming a *sangoma*'. Jane acted as the *psychopompos* ('soul guide') who led me to her father's High God shrine. And in chapters 5 and 6 it is the serene contemplation of MmaChakayile, an emaciated alcoholic cult leader approaching the age of seventy, but appearing in her trance as the incarnation of beauty and purity, and luring by that image the fieldworker over the edge of trance and towards his own locally recognised *sangomahood*. All these may be read, in Jungian terms,² as occasions when the *intercultural encounter* finds itself transformed into the young hero's quest under the aegis of the maternal archetype, or into an 'encounter with the *anima*'; the latter is the female archetypal *alter ego* that lurks in the subconscious and whose manifestations across the threshold of consciousness may bring about immensely powerful emotions to the point of breakdown of the personality. Lacanians would rather recognise here Lacan's reformulation of the Oedipus complex as an all-overriding desire of being reunited with the mother.³ The longing to reach the other shore, and to leave behind the boiling ocean of intercultural contradictions, sets the stage for these raptures, and their account is mainly written not in academic but in literary prose. But the quest for the *hieros gamos* is highly ambivalent in that it is instigated not only by the realistic hope of acceptance but also by the mythical certainty of rejection; the quest is ultimately designed to fail, not to succeed. Only

¹ And much more so in my novel *Een Buik Openen*, van Binsbergen 1988a.

² Jung 1974b: Part II ch. ii, and 1987.

³ Lacan 1993.

when this insight is finally allowed to register, can the compulsion be broken and the researcher escape from the curse of a self-destructive longing for which the anthropological fieldwork model only provided the ready vehicle. Here it becomes manifest that the personal quest for intercultural knowledge underlying the present book is to a considerable extent idiosyncratic, and transference-driven; that its insistence on the dissolution of boundaries is not entirely intersubjective and neutral, but also reflects a personal neurotic problematic. Though brutal and distortive appropriation is argued to form a standard, and regrettable, mode of knowledge production in the anthropology of my colleagues, my own alternative and equally distortive strategy has been to aspire to be appropriated (accepted, to the point of being formally adopted): by the Nkoya and their royal court ceremonial, and by the *sangomas* in Botswana. This 'quest to have others appropriate me' now appears as a chronic professional disorder, partial recovery from which may only be brought about by a change of climate: away from institutionalised anthropology, through a migration to the lonely pioneering frontier area of intercultural philosophy, under the scorching sun of conceptualisation and rationality, where textual representation comes to stand in the place of real-life encounters.

As set out in Chapter 5, I was brought to accept the status of *sangoma* diviner-healer-priest which was offered to me, and so I myself have become the certified exponent of a local African belief and therapy system. Soon this specialist role was to be exercised not only in Botswana but also in the North Atlantic, in combination even with a professorial chair in anthropology. Inevitably I found myself caught in all sorts of epistemological, social, medical and legal dilemmas; a meticulous discussion of these dilemmas (in the other chapters of Part III) allows us to draw the intercultural lessons from becoming a *sangoma*. Instead of being a merely performative leap into anti-intellectualist obscurantism inspired by shallow and guilt-ridden feelings of intercontinental solidarity, the intercultural adoption and practice of a local system of belief and ritual forces us (according to the argument in chapter 7) to address explicitly the contradictions inherent in established North Atlantic procedures of intercultural knowledge production. Not only does Part III challenge, on political grounds, the common condescending assumption, among North Atlantic students of African religion that reductionist deconstruction is their only permissible analytical stance. Proceeding from the political to the epistemological domain, the argument of chapter 7 leads us to suspect that, when an independent epistemology outside the North Atlantic (like the *sangomas*' epistemology) acknowledges sources of knowledge not recognised in North Atlantic scientifically underpinned convictions, recognition in itself may bring these sources to flow and to yield valid knowledge. We are thus reminded of the dangers attached to any attempt to think interculturality along lines of conceptualisation and epistemology exclusively set by North Atlantic intellectual traditions.

Chapter 5, drafted in 1990, still takes for granted the naïve anthropological perspective (the assumption of the possibility of total understanding and totally

faithful representation by total identification and immersion), only to protest against it; as if I was saying to myself:

‘If I am not allowed to join my hosts as an anthropologist, let me go for even more total identification, and try to become like them even in ways that are incompatible with my habitus as an empirical scientist.’

The subsequent chapters in Part III record the continued struggle with the contradictions inherent in such an attitude. This inevitably raised the question of integrity.

‘Is integrity at all a viable concept in intercultural situations?’, I ask in chapter 6, where I deal at length with the apparent contradiction embodied in my position as a North Atlantic White who is both a university professor and a *sangoma*. The answer is hard to give, because the very notion of integrity conveys the sense of the monolithic – one person, one culture, one commitment, one standard to measure them by. In a globalised context, where values and other cultural contents are flowing as much as people and commodities, and many boundaries are dissolving, integrity may not be the most obvious concept to assess the value of ideas, of actions, of a person. Instead, I have tried to render my own claims to integrity in the field of *sangomahood* susceptible to debate by offering a detailed discussion of background, contradictions, personal aspirations and doubts, thus at least giving signs of the earnestness, and of the willingness to make myself vulnerable, that in many mono-cultural settings are taken for signs of integrity. The central lesson is this chapter is that integrity (best exemplified by the closed, bounded, integrated, and lineal characteristics of *the book* as the central symbol of North Atlantic civilisation)¹ can only be realised, be thought, within any one cultural orientation, and not at the intersection between such orientations, not *interculturally*. This disturbing thought implicitly threatens to defeat the whole of the present book’s project: seeking to derive lessons from intercultural situations, it cannot aspire to the kind of shining integrity so blissfully waiting for philosophers who have wisely (?) stuck to one cultural orientation – their own. This abyss opening up in chapter 6 may be identical to the one concerning knowledge in chapter 7: there, an examination of the implication of the common (although – as I admit there – not totally state-of-the-art) definition of knowledge as ‘justified true belief’ reveals that – just like integrity – also knowledge can very well be defined and assessed within one cultural orientation, but becomes an extremely complex and contradictory concept when applied interculturally. It appears as if this book’s project, whose *integrity* has first been recognised to be inherently problematic, must also give up almost all hope of producing valid intercultural *knowledge* – a somewhat depressing thought in a book whose focus is the philosophy of interculturality.

However, chapters 6, 7 and 8 also offer other, more dynamic, solutions to the problem of intercultural integrity: if *sangomahood* is a responsibility to insert

¹ In chapters 13 and 15 I come back to the book model as informing our taken-for-granted contemporary notions of ‘culture’.

oneself into the stream of life force and to assist others in doing so, and if this is to bring about the transformation of death into life on which *sangomahood* revolves, then it cannot remain a learned lesson faithfully and punctually brought into practice. On the contrary, its claims to integrity have to be assessed by a different standard, notably by the extent to which the *sangoma* manages to realise such transformation in the sense of redefining *sangomahood* into a new and viable form. In chapter 7 the details of such transformation are presented and analysed with both frankness and confidence when I deal with my attempts to create and mediate a *sangomahood* that has a global format and uses the Internet as its vehicle. The earlier abyss of multiculturalism into which integrity and knowledge threatened to sink, is argued to be chimerical, an artefact of the boundary imposition we are tempted to engage in for geopolitical, hegemonic reasons. Instead, a unitary epistemology is argued to create the possibility of an intercultural truth that renders (epistemological, and cultural) relativism an obsolete position.

The anti-relativist thinker proclaims to measure all cultural orientations, even the weakest in terms of power and numbers, even the one whose bearers have undergone the greatest historical wrongs, by a common standard that has global validity and applicability. This is the reason why, despite my awareness of what is considered politically correct and intercontinentally polite today, I refuse to give in to familiar North–South pressures that often turn global intellectual debate into a popularity contest, and shun from engaging in real incisive debate with Southern colleagues. However, I take my African colleagues, be they social scientists, historians, philosophers or *sangomas*, as seriously as I take myself. Therefore, it is my historical duty to engage in free and open debate with them – not because I deny their and their ancestors’ historical pain (I acknowledge that pain especially in chapters 4, 5, 6 and 14 – I come from my own history of under-privilege, and know suffering on that basis; and I have been publicly chosen to be a servant of ancestors both European and African), but because any other attitude on my part would perpetuate and aggravate their greatest pain: being excluded from common humanity. This is why, at various points in the present book, I viciously fight condescension in the North–South debate; and this is why, at other points in this book, and in my other works, I engage in critical debate with distinguished and esteemed African colleagues such as Gyekye, Mazrui, Ramose, Oruka, Mudimbe – or, for that matter, with an Asian-born intercultural philosopher like Mall.

In the late 1990s I could still write:

‘The surplus value which *sangomahood* yet holds for me, has also been the reason why in later years 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

Do I truly believe in the tenets of Nkoya witchcraft and kingship which I act out in Zambia? Do I truly believe in the *sangoma* world view which I act out in Botswana,

¹ See section 5.3.

the Netherlands, and worldwide on the Internet? For many years I have postponed facing up to these obvious and legitimate questions, because I felt that any attempt to discursively answer these questions, would take me back to the condescending, deconstructivist anthropological stance I had hoped to escape from by ‘becoming a *sangoma*’.

I have in the meantime realised that this was leaving the thinking of and about *sangoma* half-way undone, so that the lessons this process contains for interculturality would not be allowed to be articulated – as if I was running away from them myself. I have since, in newly written chapters 7 and 8, remedied the epistemological vacuum surrounding my earlier view of *sangomahood*. This helped me to develop and express the view that the self-evident relativism informing my earlier pieces on *sangomahood* threatened to defeat my entire intercultural project; in the place of relativism, I now propose a non-relativist unitary epistemology in line with my adage (most fully developed in the concluding chapter 15) that ‘cultures do not exist’.

Chapter 15 (1999) presents the proud *tour de force* in which such an overall theoretical perspective is being attempted, in an argument that reaches back to many of the preceding chapters, and thus offers a fitting conclusion for the book as a whole. It is important that that argument emphatically identifies as an exercise in intercultural philosophy; for I repeat, a resolution of the contradictions of intercultural knowledge production brought out in Parts II and III could not be reached within the anthropological discourse but only in some meta-discourse such as intercultural philosophy. (In chapter 12, I will even go so far as to claim – in challenge to the pioneering intercultural philosopher R.A. Mall – that no such resolution is likely to be achieved in any language-based discourse, but only in non-lingual or peripherally-lingual practices.) At any rate, being a programmatic and polemical overview, written moreover at the very beginning of my practice as an intercultural philosopher, limitations adhere to chapter 15 which could not be remedied there without destroying that chapter’s manifestly effective argument, and which instead have been in part compensated in the most recently written chapters.

One of the principal reasons the North Atlantic region has had both for studying ‘other cultures’, and for reifying these as absolutely and insurmountably different, has been: *to allow North Atlantic civilisation to construct itself on the basis of a claim of a rationality and science incomparably superior to the thought processes engaged in by humans in other continents*. One of the tasks of intercultural philosophy is then to explode such hegemonic projection from the North Atlantic. Intercultural philosophy can do so by taking seriously the human thought processes elsewhere, by approaching in their own right the belief systems based on them, and particularly by exposing the geopolitical, class, gender, racial, and other collective interests that have imposed the violence of boundaries between subsets of humankind in the first place. Clearly, here lie enormous problems that a substantial literature on belief, rationality, and interculturality has helped us to appreciate. To this literature I add, as my personal contribution culminating in the present book:

Chapter 0

- my own extensive and painful confrontation as an anthropologist with non-Western world views in a number of fieldwork settings;
- my long-standing practice of one non-Western knowledge system as a *sangoma*;
- my extensive evidence that knowledge sources not recognised by North Atlantic science can yet yield valid knowledge;
- my attempt to formulate a non-relativist unitary epistemology;
- and my long-ranging historical and comparative analyses that help establish the empirical conditions which underpin my claims that ‘cultures do not exist’, that all human knowledge production is interconnected and therefore subjected to a converging epistemology.

Chapter 7 comes closest to unfolding the epistemological problems that *sangomahood* poses. It presents an argument in which the extrasensory knowledge apparently produced by *sangoma* divination can be appreciated to be just that, in the context of a wider argument about the structure of the world beyond the boundary conditions constituting sensorialist rationality. In this way it argues the importance of the study of cultural orientations outside the North Atlantic region: not only for reasons of equality, recognition, and some sort of preservation of biodiversity in the field of culture, but also for a fourth reason that is neither political, nor emotional, nor humanitarian. This reason is simply the following: sensorialist rationality has so restricted the sources of knowledge which are recognised and admissible in the North Atlantic and global contexts, that other cultural orientations’ familiarity with other sources of knowledge, and with the procedures – the mental technologies – of tapping these sources, will add immensely to humanity’s knowledge about the world and about itself.

Chapter 8 originated in my personal experiences as a researcher and *sangoma*, and this lends the specific structure and tension to the chapter. At the culmination of my initiation as a *sangoma*, I re-visited the Nata shrine of the High God Mwali in northern Botswana, and here was confronted with two riddles. One concerned the self-proclaimed identity of the shrine’s high priest as ‘Mbedzi’; the other concerned the identity that was there unexpectedly imposed upon me: of – allegedly – belonging to a ‘kind of people whose traditional dress is the leopard skin’.

For the first riddle, an answer presents itself with my discovery of historical cultic relations between the South Central African Mwali cult, and the great religions of South Asia.

The second riddle proved far less easy to answer. After an initial, abortive survey of identity construction through leopard symbolism in Europe, South Africa, and South Central Africa, I embarked on a pain-staking analysis across three continents, and with a time range from the Upper Palaeolithic to the present day. I carefully trace leopard symbolism in sub-Saharan Africa; in the Eastern Mediterranean basin between the Neolithic and Late Antiquity; in Christianity (with excursions into

Judaism and Islam); Ancient Egypt;¹ and Asia (with special attention to India and China). In the process, I paid considerable attention to ancient astronomies as relatively well-documented and enduring formal systems yielding the kind of historical and comparative data we need in order to make sense of leopard symbolism in space and time. At long last I did find the answer to the second riddle, and again it points to massive Indian influence on South Central African cults. The obligation to wear a leopard skin turns out to be rooted in the legal requirement, stipulated in the Hindu *Institutes of Vishnu* from the early first millennium CE, for religious students of *Kshatriya* (warrior) caste status to wear a tiger skin. When I hit upon this text passage, the earlier part of my quest had already made me aware of the symbolic equivalence, *grosso modo*, of leopard and tiger in much of Asia.

But meanwhile, far more comprehensive patterns of continuity and differentiation throughout the cultural history of the Old World² had become discernible, enabling me to situate *sangomahood* in great detail, and with great scope in space and time, within the Old World's evolving cultural history of symbolism, spirituality, and shamanism. During fourteen months from late Spring, 2002, I postponed the publication of *Intercultural encounters* in order to complete this new quest. I collected the scattered and fragmented data from such diverse disciplines as comparative linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, even genetics; reconciled the inevitable contradictions between these disciplines, their paradigms and their findings; straightened out the complex methodological requirements of such a quest; and wrote out my results – into what was originally (like chapter 7) an afterthought to chapter 6, but effectively turned out to be another, fully-fledged book in its own right. Incorporating that book here would have had the advantage of meaningfully pursuing the line of argument on *sangomahood* and bringing it to its ultimate conclusion. However, doing so would not only make the book absolutely unmanageable in size, but – with such a massive input of original empirical historical research – would also detract from the, at times already shaky, intercultural philosophical orientation of the present book. So the reader must inevitably miss, in this book, my final objectifying account of *sangomahood*, in which I draw the detailed and world-wide cultural historical lessons of my fifteen years of immersion in this spiritual idiom. But the companion volume *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots: Towards a World History of Shamanism from the Perspective of the Southern*

¹ I will capitalise 'Ancient' when it designates a specific civilisation that flourished in previous millennia and has no direct continuity with the present, e.g. 'Ancient Egypt', 'Ancient Mesopotamia'.

² By 'Old World', I mean Africa, Asia and Europe, regardless of historical period. The term is not meant to exclude the inhabitants of Oceania, Australia, and the Americas from the mainstream of human cultural history, but simply to admit that, largely as a result of research undertaken over the past hundred years, the global collectivity of scholars involved in the production of scientific knowledge happens to be best (but still very imperfectly) informed with regard to historical processes, and their interrelations, in Africa, Asia and Europe. And of course, distinguishing these three continents as if they were viable units of cultural history, and linking them into a comprehensive Old World, reflects a late modern geopolitics that is greatly influenced by North Atlantic hegemony.

African Sangoma Cult has already been drafted in full, and, given time, health, and ancestral assistance, will be out before long.

0.1.3. Introducing Part IV: ‘From cultural anthropology to intercultural philosophy’

Meanwhile, participatory fieldwork as reported in localising and particularising monographs is not the only procedure of intercultural knowledge production open to the Africanist anthropologist. Comparative and historical work offers additional approaches, ultimately relying, at least in part, upon the knowledge construction through fieldwork but not necessarily marred by the latter’s contradictions. Some of these approaches are pursued in Part IV.

These chapters explore, in broad general terms drawing examples from many different local linguistic and cultural settings in Africa, some of the basic technologies of sociability and anti-sociability around which African community life can be said to be organised: reconciliation and witchcraft.¹ It is the attempt at generalisation that allows these chapters to steer the argument away from the pitfalls of idiosyncrasy, identification and transference that form the great themes in Part II and III. What emerges is, in the first place, exercises in intercultural explanation, not primarily at the *emic* level of faithfully rendered local concepts and texts but at the *etic* level of the distancing description of enduring structures, procedures and social technologies. Here a number of basic tools of analysis are deployed and shown to go some way towards a structural, generalising understanding of African situations: such concepts as cosmology, virtuality, the village, community, globalisation, kinship, class, and class conflict.

Along these lines, chapter 9 discusses – inspired by Kant’s theory of *sensus communis* as springing from aesthetic judgement – symbolic production as affirmation of either universalist or particularist constructions of community, on the basis of ethnographic material from the Nkoya people of western central Zambia.

Chapter 10 considers the production of knowledge and of ignorance under the specific politics of intercultural knowledge production obtaining in the same part of Africa in the context of international development intervention.

Chapter 11 (on reconciliation) presents:

- (a) *a model of an African hermeneutic social technology* (that of reconciliation, on the basis not of demonstrable legal principles but of the *invention* of points of agreement, more or less by sleight-of-hand but still within a given socio-cultural framework) *that, in its turn, can serve*
- (b) *as a model of intercultural knowledge production in general.*

¹ I would have preferred to be able to offset, in this book, chapter 11 on reconciliation against my recent piece on ‘Witchcraft as virtualised boundary condition of the kinship order’ (van Binsbergen 2001b), but this appeared in print too recently to be included in the present book, which is already of excessive length anyway.

Much of the sting may be taken out of the methodological and epistemological problems presented in Parts II and III once we realise that intercultural knowledge is, in the first place, *representation*: a hermeneutics that at best indicates, obliquely, many of the basic traits of the original, but yet always produces a secondary product that is essentially new, different, and distorted. Intercultural knowledge production, therefore, is a form of mediation closely resembling African reconciliation: it is not necessarily truthful, cannot even claim or afford to be totally truthful, yet it *works*, in the sense that it demonstrably informs and supports a social practice much in the way that an anthropological fieldworker's intercultural knowledge is demonstrated to *work* when it allows her to elicit progressively positive and supportive recognitions of sociability on the part of the host community.

Here lies the transition to Part V, towards an intercultural philosophical orientation rather than an anthropological orientation.

0.1.4. Introducing Part V: Exercises in intercultural philosophy

It is with a certain reluctance and nostalgia that I make this transition towards Part V.

Crossing from anthropology to philosophy has enhanced my awareness of the philosophy of science and of epistemology; it certainly made me appreciate more clearly whatever was wrong with the kind of anthropology I had engaged in until then, and it has given me some of the tools needed to articulate that insight. Yet I cannot bring myself to distance myself completely from my earlier scientific work, with all the long years of painstaking and passionate research and writing this has involved. I may have become a philosopher, of sorts, but I remain an empirical scientist. I cannot jettison the truth procedures that, however critically assessed and renewed, constitute my identity, my habitus and ethos, as a scientist. This is not to say that in the last analysis every philosophical argument is to undergo an empirical test. But, at any rate, those aspects of a philosophical argument that directly amount to a statement about empirical reality, or that imply such a statement (and on second thoughts, most philosophical statements have such implications, certainly indirectly), must be treated with the same procedural carefulness developed within the empirical sciences (be they natural or social).

Most of my philosophical colleagues are philosophers in the first place. Ever since they were adolescents, they have spent their life exposing themselves to the canonised literature of philosophy. They did not build up an oeuvre and a name as empirical scientists. They can afford to be primarily concerned, not with the empirical grounding of their arguments, but with the latter's conceptual and discursive formal correctness and elegance. Here the dextrous and detailed reference to the ideas of great philosophers is often the hallmark of professionalism and a major factor in the authority accorded to my colleagues' arguments. In the last few years, I have learned to imitate them somewhat in these respects. After all, I am an experienced fieldworker who has mastered the art of picking up a local cultural orientation and emulating it in his own behaviour and speech. There is no reason why I could not apply the same technique after shifting my fieldwork location to the

Rotterdam philosophical faculty – an ironical statement, of course, because I moved in order to become something other than a fieldworker, and to be a colleague, not an observer, of the local philosophers. Yet of course my reading, for decades, has been largely in a very different direction from that of my philosophical colleagues, and I will never be able to catch up in this respect. This is one of the reasons why my work, even if intended as philosophical, inevitably continues to display the hallmarks of a stranger and outsider in the eyes of my philosophical colleagues. Another reason is that my empirical bias forces me to acknowledge, in all sorts of arguments, the empirically given situation (often a concrete intercultural situation whose contradictions and complexities I have lived through myself, and which has helped to shape me as a person) as a compelling constraint upon my freedom to generate statements. By contrast, my philosophical colleagues tend to opt for a much greater independent creativity in conceptualising and rendering reality, in combination with a much greater fidelity (informed by their much greater erudition) vis-à-vis the canonical philosophical literature. Their assumption appears to be that in the last analysis a philosophical argument should not allow itself to be dictated by empirical reality; my point of departure, on the other hand, is that a philosophical argument which demonstrably does not submit to being compelled by empirical reality, particularly not by a personally-lived-through reality, is uninteresting and futile. As a result (and I make this claim extensively in chapter 15), philosophy in my hands comes close to being an empirical subject once more,¹ and occasionally comes close even to being an autobiographical confession and apology. The difference in style between my own writing and that of my philosophical colleagues is unmistakable and occasionally produces misunderstanding and irritations both in them and in myself. This is part of the peculiar position I have come to occupy between disciplines, and I have given up trying to disguise it with ever more reading, ever more erudite window-dressing. I might even co-opt one of the greatest philosophers in the Western tradition to my side, tendentiously reading Plato's exhortation of *sōízein ta phainόμενα* ('doing justice to evident manifestations' – commonly interpreted as having only one very narrow reference in connection with the movements of planets against the night sky) as an empiricist credo; in a way it is one, after all.

Reluctant, nostalgic – yes, but only up to a point. For it has been my own free choice – and a felicitous one – to try and confront in intercultural philosophy the dilemmas that oppressed me in anthropology, and so in Part V the book's central problems are addressed not so much in an evocative or empirical way (as in the preceding Parts) but in a discursive manner: *what is the nature of intercultural knowledge? And under what conditions can reliable, valid and relevant knowledge be produced across (what is commonly taken to be) cultural boundaries?*

¹ 'Once more', for this is how the Western philosophical tradition started out in the first place, with the Presocratics, Plato and Aristotle: as a way to account for empirical reality by meta-empirical theory.

Intercultural philosophy represents a discourse ideally capable of identifying and supplanting the defective models of thought and the naïve epistemologies with which I, for one, began to produce intercultural knowledge as a budding anthropologist. It alerts us to the performative nature of identity claims, and helps us to deconstruct ‘culture’, and especially ‘cultures’ and ‘cultural boundaries’. This is the case even though the concept of culture has come to constitute one of the most powerful collective representations of the contemporary world (particularly the North Atlantic region); by its very political nature, this concept must be distrusted as a self-evident tool of detached philosophical analysis. In intercultural knowledge production, the distortive effects of *projection* and *transference* are obvious; but intercultural philosophy reminds us that also *identification*, even identification for the best reasons of political solidarity, does not necessarily lead to statements that are logically and conceptually compelling, as well as empirically sustainable, in other words, that are *true*. At the same time it forces us to reflect on the possible cultural limits of any truth claims, and to explore the epistemological and conceptual conditions under which truth could be (must be) established interculturally.

Situated at a discursive plane where (and that is the great advantage of the transition from cultural anthropology to intercultural philosophy) abstraction has been made from specific personal experiences and the idiosyncrasies of anthropological fieldwork situations, and having already above precluded upon the contents and strategic contribution of some of these chapters making up Part V, their specific arguments do not require much more introduction than they give themselves in their opening sections.

Chapter 12 deals with the theoretical problems raised by globalisation and the possibility of an intercultural hermeneutics as proposed by R.A. Mall, the leading intercultural philosopher in Germany. I identify globalisation as a central problem for intercultural philosophy. *Philosophy is the dialogical development of a special language that expresses, in an innovative yet intersubjective manner, aporias of the human experience as characteristic of the philosopher’s own historical situation* (although such expression usually includes references to other times and other places). Philosophy thus roots in a concrete spatio-temporal collective situation, whence it derives its empirical impetus and its touchstone. The empirical investigation of globalisation is obviously not the philosopher’s task, but a spate of recent empirical research demonstrates that globalisation does indeed entail profound changes and has far-reaching effects. It does create crucial aporias in the contemporary experience awaiting philosophical exploration. After sketching a framework in which these aporias can be appreciated in relation to one another, I turn to Mall’s intercultural hermeneutics as a major attempt to face up to this philosophical challenge. The critique of Mall’s approach helps to situate him and his work in the global space that – in a way he does not self-reflexively problematise – constitutes his obvious habitat, and brings us to formulate a number of research priorities for the investigation of interculturality: the nature of culture and cultures, the possibility of intercultural communication (fact or wishful thinking?), and the

role of language as a violent, estrangingly divisive, tool precisely when utilised for thinking interculturality.

Chapter 13 seeks to define a theoretical framework within which the expansion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Africa can be understood from an intercultural philosophical perspective, and with emphasis on Africa. What is the place of ICT in Africa, and what is the place of Africa in a world increasingly dominated by ICT? In this chapter's argument I seek to explode the apparent contradiction between Africa and ICT. I do so by a two-step argument. In the first part I confront African thinkers like Mazrui and Gyekye, who have argued that African culture and ICT are incompatible. Here three two-tiered statements are discussed and largely dismissed:

- (1) (a) ICT is owned by the North, and hence (b) ICT is irreconcilably opposed to African culture;
- (2) (a) ICT is metalocal world culture, without local specificity and local validity, in other words owned by everyone and no one, and hence (b) ICT is in principle devastating for any localising cultural identity owned by a specific set of people, such as the African identity;
- (3) (a) ICT is inimical to culture as owned by a specific set of people, and hence (b) ICT is inimical to the African culture or cultures and to the sets of people that claim ownership of the latter.

Having advanced a philosophical argument to the effect that ICT is just as much and as little owned by Africans as by any other collectivity in the contemporary world, I proceed in the second part of the chapter with a more empirical argument setting forth some of the ways in which the African appropriation of ICT is actually taking shape.

Chapter 14 brings out the complexities that arise once philosophical concepts are taken out of the ivory tower and applied to the rich empirical reality of African societies. An empirical corrective is then absolutely necessary, and especially a corrective from the social sciences: one that does not just consider (like most philosophers do) the individual person and his rationality. Set against the background of my personal intellectual and political itinerary, the argument explores the contents, the format and societal locus of the concept of *ubuntu* as propounded by academic philosophers, managers and politicians in Southern Africa today. The concept's utopian and prophetic nature is recognised. This allows us to see a considerable positive application for it at the centre of the globalised urban societies of Southern Africa today. *Ubuntu* philosophy is argued to constitute not a straightforward *emic* rendering of a pre-existing African philosophy available since times immemorial in the various languages belonging to the Bantu language family. Instead, *ubuntu* philosophy is a remote *etic* reconstruction, in an alien globalised format, of a set of implied ideas that do inform aspects of village and kin relations in many contexts in contemporary Southern Africa. The historical depth of these ideas

is difficult to gauge. Their original format differs greatly from the academic codifications of *ubuntu*. After highlighting the anatomy of reconciliation, the role of intellectuals, and the globalisation of Southern African society, the argument concludes with an examination of the potential dangers of *ubuntu*: mystifying real conflict, perpetuating resentment (as in the case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission), and obscuring the excessive pursuit of individual gain. Finally, the potential released by *ubuntu* will be brought to bear on this argument itself, in a bid to overcome what otherwise might appear to be merely a stalemate between South and North intellectual production, and a replaying of classic moves familiar from the Gadamer/Habermas debate on tradition and the critique of ideology.

The somewhat more systematic outlines of an intercultural philosophy are primarily explored in the concluding, ambitious chapter 15. Based on my 1999 inaugural lecture at the Erasmus University, this argument presents the outline of a research programme that may yet reap the positive benefits of the intellectual and existential struggle evoked in Parts II and III of this book. In chapter 15, I seek to explode a fair number of self-evidences that have so far haunted the investigation of interculturality and that, as far as I am concerned, *should all be discarded* if any progress is to be made in intercultural philosophy. I am particularly addressing the following illusory assumptions:

- that ‘cultures’ (plural) do exist;
- that identities proclaimed within the public arenas of the contemporary multicultural society are authentic and free from performativity;
- that everyone has one and only one culture, and is inevitably tied to that one;
- that it is meaningful to speak of intercultural philosophy in the sense of comparing the ways various philosophical traditions of the world have dealt with perennial themes (such as the nature of world, the person, morality, time, force, life) without first investigating the conditions and the distortions of *interculturality* as such;
- that philosophy can afford to ignore empirical evidence as produced by the social and natural sciences;
- that Africa is a patchwork quilt of discrete, localised, bounded cultures;
- that ethnography is *ipso facto* a valid form of intercultural knowledge production;
- that intercultural philosophy as it has been pioneered over the past decade has already substantiated its claims of constituting a valid form of intercultural knowledge;
- that in cultural analysis we can afford to ignore comprehensive long-range correspondences in space and time, across millennia and across thousands of miles;
- that Greece is *the* cradle of the North Atlantic, and subsequently global, civilisation;
- and that cultural fragmentation is the original condition of humankind instead of

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a secondary product of historical group interaction.

Even despite the fireworks of chapter 15, I must resign myself to the fact that this book offers, not an accomplished and elaborate philosophy of interculturality, but the fragmented yet sustained lessons from a lifelong quest to arrive at an intercultural knowledge that is both scientific and existential, both empathic and politically responsible, both *emic* and *etic*, that addresses both the mind and the heart, and that shuns North Atlantic hegemonic imposition and instead seeks to open up new forms of valid knowledge that are available elsewhere and that yet share in the same common regime of truth.

It is not in the first place for lack of ability, or lack of familiarity with an established discursive format in either anthropology or philosophy, that my leading ideas appear scattered over the book, with the dynamics of their emergence over decades still clinging to them, and always near to the specific empirical context in which they happened to present themselves as puzzles and challenges to myself. Merely summarising, in an abstract manner, the insights to which this complex trajectory has led me, without allowing the reader to tread this trajectory for herself, would have been pointless. This book is a pioneering work. Let it be as tantalising to read as it has been for me to write. I propose it be treated as prolegomena, that will help us to construct a proper abstract theory of interculturality, but only after the present book's explorations and contradictions have made us aware of at least some of interculturality's complexities and pitfalls.

Finally, what does come through clearly in the intercultural philosophical exercises that make up the last Part of this book, is the *need for particular kinds of dynamic, alternative logic* – capable of acknowledging difference without entrenching itself in difference. In the world today, the practical logic underlying such actual intercultural encounters as make up the reality of our globalised social world, is characterised by kaleidoscopic fragmentation, inconsistency, pluriformity. Here – whatever their theoretical claims to universality – logical connections based on concepts and their relations have *in practice* only a limited, local validity, beyond which other such connections, of rather different relational content between rather different concepts, hold sway.

The increasing devastation of social, political and economic life on the African continent; the hardening of enemy stereotypes between, on the one hand, North Atlantic governments and part of their subjects, on the other hand an increasingly vocal Islam that continues to expand in Europe and Africa; the incapability of solving the Palestinian conflict and, instead, the creation of more and more scenes of war, violence, and historical cicatrisation and humiliation in the Middle East and (on 11 September 2001) on the USA eastern seaboard – these developments are the result, not simply of a universal human condition, but (among other factors) of the failure of North Atlantic hegemonic pretensions of universality, rationality and objectivity to translate themselves into world-wide dialogical communicability. The

contentious *Clash of Civilizations*¹ (now the received wisdom at the Foreign Offices of Washington, London and even The Hague) is largely an artefact of the unitary and ethnocentric illusion, as if *one* consistent logic connecting *one* well-defined set of concepts would already be capable of encompassing the totality of contemporary experiences world-wide. Ultimately supported by such arrogance as North Atlantic security and weaponry seemed to afford until recently, it is an entrenched, bookish pipe-dream, a fallacy in practical intercultural logic, even more than a fallacy of cultural and ethnic theoretical analysis (which it is also, as chapter 15 suffices to bring out).

If North Atlantic hegemony constructs the contemporary world in terms of hard binary oppositions (as is commensurate with the logic of the formal organisations, the legal texts, and the weapons technology in which North Atlantic power and identity are largely invested), then the reactions from the rest of the world can only be of two kinds:

- either a crumbling away in the face of such conceptual violence (as in the case of Africa today),
- or a head-on confrontation through an equally intransigent conceptual counter-violence, as in the case of Islam today.

Physical violence including war are only possible if justified and sustained by conceptual violence, however dim and crude. In intercultural situations, conceptual violence invariably implies the violence of representation, since it is only after a translation into terms more familiar to us that we can conceptualise the cultural Other.

Of the violence of representation, and of the tendency for it to absorb, through transference, infantile conflicts which can only warp the validity of intercultural representation and render it even more violent than it inevitably has to be, this book offers many detailed examples – at the expense of making its author (reverting to a form of relentless presentation of self which is normally reserved for the field of belles lettres) exceptionally vulnerable, as an anthropologist, as a philosopher, and as a human being struggling for integrity, insight, true human encounter, liberation from the burdens of the past, love.

But on the positive side, this book does indicate some of the directions in which such dynamic, alternative logics may be found:

- in Derridean deconstruction and *différance*;
- in Lévi-Straussian *savage thought*, which (whether we intellectuals like it or not) is the inconsistent standard mode of thought of most human beings in most situations world-wide, and also of ourselves unless we are in a specifically marked technical academic mode;

¹ Cf. Huntington 1996.

- in dialogue;
- in the mythomaniacal logic of association and projection that a century of psychoanalysis has taught us to recognise and that we should first of all use, not condescendingly and gleefully to detect the transference in *other's* behaviour, but self-critically, to identify such transference in our own construction of knowledge;
- in African techniques of reconciliation through creative and selective hermeneutics;
- in intercultural hermeneutics for which both cultural anthropology and intercultural philosophy, despite all their shortcomings as highlighted in this book, have proposed promising models and methods in the course of the twentieth century CE;
- in the notion, repeatedly employed in this book, of a *field of tension* that acknowledges difference without allowing the matter at hand to be entirely reduced to such difference;
- and (as best brought out in chapter 14) in a humility which, while recognising the violent bases of both its own and the Other's attempts at representation, continues to insist on the construction of a domain of encounter where not mutual *violence*, but sympathetic respect for each other's personal and collective *pain* guides our actions, grants us the promise of integrity, and allows us to recognise, and live (even beyond words), our shared humanity.

Only after we have sincerely explored and applied such customised and local logics, can we hope to surpass them and construct, beyond them (along such lines as proposed in chapter 7), a domain where the philosopher's and the scientist's hope of a unitary, non-relativist logic encompassing the totality of the contemporary human experience, may be more than a hegemonic imposition.

0.2. Provenance of chapters, and acknowledgements

Most chapters of the present book were previously published, either in English or in Dutch. All previously published texts have been very extensively revised, expanded and updated, in order to serve a number of purposes: the concern to reflect my current thinking; the concern to reflect developments in the various academic disciplines involved and in the world at large since the text was first drafted; and the concern to avoid at least some of the most striking repetitions and contradictions throughout the book. The book is therefore not a historically faithful reflection of my thinking and writing at any moment in the past, even though the chapter titles indicate the year in which a chapter's argument was first conceived. The book is a thematic treatment of related issues that happen to have a long history in my thinking and writing yet culminate in the present more or less sustained argument, fragmented though it is over fifteen chapters and an Introduction. Readers (if any) interested in the literal texts of original arguments will have to go back to the previous

publications. Only occasionally, when unmarked updating would have destroyed the structure of an earlier argument, have I left the text largely unchanged and instead added a footnote stating my current views or a current state of affairs.

However, I have not *systematically* projected my later views onto the earlier pieces. Thus it is only obvious that the notion of culture I am using in the older chapters is far more in line with mainstream anthropology of the last quarter of the twentieth century than with the concept of 'cultural orientation' elaborated in chapter 15.

The first version of chapter 1, on my first anthropological fieldwork in 1968, was written in 1969 at the request of Douwe Jongmans, who had been the principal supervisor of my Tunisia fieldwork, although my theses subsequently based on that research were supervised by others. The Dutch version of this paper circulated as an internal report within the Department of Anthropology, Amsterdam University, until a much revised and expanded version was published in 1987.¹ The English translation was made by Susan Janssen and Wim van Binsbergen. I wish to register my indebtedness to Douwe Jongmans, Klaas van der Veen, Marielou Creyghton and Pieter van Dijk, whose academic advice and logistic support were essential to the research-training project described here. I am indebted to the University of Amsterdam for a grant towards my 1968 fieldwork, and to the Musée des Arts et des Traditions populaires, Tunis, for research clearance in that connection. Later trips were made in 1970, 1979 and 2002, in which connection I express my gratitude to the Free University Amsterdam (1979) and the African Studies Centre, Leiden (2002).

A first version of chapter 2, on Pierre-Philippe Rey's work, was presented at the African Studies Centre, Leiden, in the Autumn of 1979; later versions at a seminar I gave as Simon Professor, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester, February 1980, and at a seminar of the Dutch Association of African Studies, Leiden, 4 November 1983. I am indebted to Martin Doornbos, Peter Geschiere, Terence Ranger, and Pierre-Philippe Rey, for their stimulating remarks, and to Ria van Hal, Adrienne van Wijngaarden and Mieke Zwart-Brouwer for typing successive drafts of this paper. The paper was published in: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., & Hesselings, G.S.C.M., 1984, eds., *Aspecten van Staat en Maatschappij in Afrika: Recent Dutch and Belgian Research on the African State*, Leiden: African Studies Centre, pp. 163-180, which has been out of print for many years. A German version appeared as: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1984, 'Kann die Ethnologie zur Theorie des Klassenkampfes in der Peripherie werden?: Reflexionen über das Werk von Pierre-Philippe Rey', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 9, 4: 138-148.

After having been drafted and repeatedly and extensively revised from 1984 onwards, chapter 3 was originally published in Dutch in 1987,² in a book *Afrika in Spiegelbeeld*, which I edited jointly with Martin Doornbos. The chapter was based

¹ Van Binsbergen 1987b.

² Van Binsbergen 1987a.

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on anthropological and historical fieldwork I undertook in western Zambia and under migrants from this area in Lusaka, from 1972 to 1974, and during shorter periods in 1977, 1978 and 1981; and which I subsequently visited in 1988, 1989, 1992 (twice), 1994 (twice) and 1995. In addition to the persons and institutions mentioned in the general acknowledgements at the end of this section, I am indebted to the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO) for financial support while writing up in the academic year 1974-1975. The English translation of chapter 3 was made by Juultje Heymans and Wim van Binsbergen. I am indebted to Martin Doornbos for stimulating comments. I am dedicating this piece to my eldest daughter, Nezmá, whose name derives from my first fieldwork. As a toddler she lived through the (especially medical) agonies of my first fieldwork among the Nkoya. Her first language was Nkoya. It was by imagining her as an adolescent girl undergoing the Nkoya puberty rites, that I opened up to their beauty and wisdom.

Chapter 4 is a revised version of an argument originally presented at the African Futures Conference, Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh, 9-11 December 1987, celebrating that institution's twenty-fifth anniversary. The original version was published as: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1988, 'Reflections on the future of anthropology in Africa', in: Fyfe, C., ed., *African futures: Twenty-fifth Anniversary Conference*, Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, Seminar Proceedings, No. 28, pp. 293-309. To the present version extensive references have been added whereas the original version had none; the original 1987 postscript has been incorporated in the main text now, whereas a new postscript has been added in order to comment on the 1987 situation from the perspective of 2002.

The specific fieldwork on which chapter 5 (as well as the rest of Part III) is based was undertaken in Francistown and surrounding areas, Botswana, in April-May 1988, November 1988-October 1989, and during shorter visits in 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1995, and 1999. I am greatly indebted to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for funding and encouragement; and to the Applied Research Unit, Ministry of Local Government and Lands, Republic of Botswana, for local support. A first Dutch version was published¹ in a Festschrift for Gerrit Grootenhuis (director of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, in the 1960s-1980s). Earlier English versions of this paper were presented at the Seminar on 'Symbol and Symptom', Africa Research Centre, Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, January 1991; and at the Seventh Satterthwaite Colloquium on African Religion and Ritual, Satterthwaite (Cumbria, U.K.), April 1991. I am grateful to Robert Baum, René Devisch, Ørnulf Gulbrandsen, Adrian Hastings, John Janzen, Murray Last, Cesare Poppi, Matthew Schoffeleers, Elizabeth Tonkin, Richard Werbner and David Zeitlyn for stimulating comments, and especially to Robert Buijtenhuijs, whose incisive and dismissive comments on an early version helped me to define my position much more clearly, although this did not prevent our further, and increasingly contentious, exchanges on

¹ Van Binsbergen 1990b.

this issue. A much shorter English version was published as: ‘Becoming a *sangoma*: Religious anthropological field-work in Francistown, Botswana’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 21, 4: 309-344; I am indebted to that journal’s editor and its publisher, Brill, Leiden, for their generous consent to include the greatly revised paper in the present book.

Chapter 6 originated in such a further exchange with Robert Buijtenhuijs: his draft of an Open Letter, intended to explode, within the Dutch Africanist community, my claims of being an initiated and certified Southern African diviner-priest. For reasons of collegial consideration Buijtenhuijs graciously gave up the idea of publishing his spirited draft, but, being less gracious myself, and having been greatly stimulated by Buijtenhuijs’ thoughtful text, a revised Dutch version of my apology, revised so as to be independent from Buijtenhuijs’ text, was published in a Festschrift for Matthew Schoffeleers in 1999.¹ In addition to Robert Buijtenhuijs I am indebted, especially to my beloved wife Patricia van Binsbergen-Saegerman, and further to René Devisch, Gerti Hesseling, Bonno Thoden van Velzen, Jacqueline Bhabha, Ineke van Wetering, Richard Werbner, Jos van der Klei and Heinz Kimmerle, to the successive year groups of the students of my course on ‘Some foundations of intercultural philosophy’, Erasmus University Rotterdam, and to the clients who, from 1990 onwards, have applied to me for *sangoma* divination and therapy both in Africa and worldwide – all of whom have helped me to bring some clarity into the contradictions of pursuing an African ritual specialist role in a North Atlantic environment, and as a North Atlantic senior academic.²

Chapter 7 was written in the summer of 2002, after most of this book had been in preparation for years and had more or less attained its final shape. Working on the book, and circulating it for several years among my colleagues, my students, and the visitors of my websites, had enhanced both my confidence and my sense that something essential was still missing, that I was holding back in a way unbecoming a professional philosopher. I am indebted to those of my colleagues who have challenged my earlier views on *sangomahood*, and to my students and sometime assistants Louise Müller and Roderick van den Bosch, for driving home the inadequacy of this position. So finally, to the political and emotional arguments that I had been using to justify my ‘becoming a *sangoma*’, I now add epistemological ones. Thus I draw the systematic lessons which this anecdotal episode in one person’s life can be argued to have for our understanding of interculturality, the human condition, and the structure of the world. An earlier version of chapter 7 was presented at the conference on ‘Wereldbeelden, wetenschappen en wij: Naar meer kritische, verantwoorde en open wetenschappen’ [World views, the sciences and us: Towards a more critical, more responsible and less entrenched conception of science], Centre Leo Apostel for the Philosophy of Science, Free University, Brussels, Belgium, 10 June 2003. I am indebted to Nicole Note for organising this

¹ Van Binsbergen 1998b.

² Cf. van Binsbergen 2001c, 2002b, 2002c.

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exciting event, and to René Devisch and Dirk Aerts for stimulating comments on my paper made in that connection. The discussion, in this chapter, of the epistemological dimensions of *sangoma* science as independently unlocking – for such is my claim – sources of valid knowledge that happen not to be admissible to North Atlantic science, summarises more extensive arguments which I was invited to present before the Annual Meeting of the Netherlands Association for the Philosophy of Science, November 2001, and the UNESCO conference on African rationality held in Porto Novo, Benin, in September 2002.

Also chapter 8 was written from the summer of 2002 onwards, as an afterthought addition to this book, in a final attempt to live up to the lessons of chapter 7 concerning Old World long-range cultural interconnectedness, and the unitary underlying structure of truth and meaning. The chapter shows how a Southern African cult may contain many South Asian elements; it originally was to accommodate my extensive analysis of leopard-skin symbolism throughout the Old World, which however soon grew into a separate book, *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots*, currently being finalised for publication.

Earlier versions of chapter 9 were presented at the September 1997 meeting of the Research Group of the Dutch–Flemish Association for Intercultural Philosophy (NVVIF), and at the conference ‘Common sense (*sensus communis*) in arts and politics in Western and non-Western philosophies’, organised by the NVVIF and the Faculty of Philosophy at Erasmus University Rotterdam, November 21–22, 1997. For useful comments I am indebted to the members of the Research Group and the conference participants, and particularly to my colleague Henk Oosterling. The piece has been published¹ in a collective volume edited by Heinz Kimmerle and Henk Oosterling and published with Rodopi, Amsterdam/Atlanta. I am indebted to the editors and publishers for their generous consent to include the paper in the present book.

Chapter 10 was originally presented at the Wageningen conference on ‘Decision-making in natural resources management, with a focus on adaptive management’, organised by IUCN-SUI, Tropenbos and the Department of Forestry of Wageningen Agricultural University, 23 September, 1999.

The first Dutch version of chapter 11 was originally presented at the symposium *Verzoend of verscheurd?* (‘Reconciled or torn apart?’) at the *Bezinningscentrum* (‘Centre for Contemplation’), Free University, Amsterdam, 9 October, 1997. An earlier, Dutch version of this paper appeared in the journal *In de Marge*, December, 1997.² I am indebted to the Trust Fund of the Erasmus University Rotterdam, for funding a trip to South Africa in the context of which a much enlarged English version of this paper was presented at the Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa, 21 April, 1999; I am grateful to the members of that institution for illuminating discussions in this connection.

¹ Van Binsbergen 2000a.

² Van Binsbergen 1997e.

The original Dutch version of chapter 12 was prepared for the Dutch–Flemish Day of Philosophy (theme ‘globalisation’), Catholic University Tilburg, Philosophical Faculty, 30 October 1999; that version was published in the Proceedings of this conference: Baars, J., & Starman, E., eds., *Het Eigene en het Andere: Filosofie en Globalisering: Acta van de 21e Nederlands-Vlaamse Filosofiedag*, Delft: Eburon, pp. 37-52. I am indebted to Raymond Corbey for chairing the panel within which the paper was presented, and for encouraging comments.

Acceding to the chair of intercultural philosophy, Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, turned out to imply membership of the Working Group on ‘Philosophy of Information and Communication Technology’ (FICT). In that connection chapter 13 was originally written and discussed on various occasions. The Dutch version has now appeared as part of a book edited by Jos de Mul: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2002, ‘ICT vanuit intercultureel perspectief: Een Afrikaanse verkenning’, in: *Filosofie in Cyberspace: Reflecties op de Informatie- en Communicatietechnologie*, Kampen: Klement, pp. 88-115. English versions were presented before the Theme Group on Globalisation, African Studies Centre (1999), Leiden; at the African Studies Centre’s seminar; at the monthly seminar of the WOTRO (Netherlands Foundation for Tropical Research) Research Programme on Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities (1999); at the Department of Philosophy, University of Ghana, 25 June, 2000; and at the International Conference on Globalization and New Questions of Ownership, African Studies Centre, Leiden, April 2002. I am grateful to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for financing my trips to Botswana (where part of the material for this chapter was collected) and to Ghana. For useful comments, I am grateful to the participants in these various groups and meetings, and moreover to Hans Achterhuis, Gerti Hesseling, Francis Nyamnjoh, Elli de Rijk, and Willem Veerman.

When Vernie February became a member of the theme group on Globalisation I initiated and chaired at the African Studies Centre, Leiden, in 1996, he kindled my interest in the emergence of *ubuntu* as a key concept in contemporary Southern African transformation processes – an interest since intensified through contacts with Mogobe Ramose, Oswell Hapanyengwi, and the Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa; with the latter institution an ultimately abortive plan was worked out for a major conference on the topic. Against this background, a first version of chapter 14 was presented at the conference on *African Renaissance and Ubuntu Philosophy* held in May 2001 at the University of Groningen, organised by Pieter Boele van Hensbroek. The ethnographic passages in the present chapter are largely based on my anthropological and historical fieldwork in Zambia and Botswana, with extensions to Zimbabwe and South Africa, since 1971, for which I owe acknowledgements to: my family; to my African friends and relatives participating in these researches; to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands; the Trust Fund, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands; the University of Zambia; the Ministry of Lands, Local Government and Housing, Botswana; the University of Durban-Westville, South Africa; and the Human Sciences Research

Council, South Africa. For this specific chapter I am indebted, besides those already mentioned, to Simon Simonse, Marleen Ramsey, the participants in the Groningen conference, and finally to the members of the department of the Philosophy of Man and Culture (Erasmus University Rotterdam), as well as to René Devisch, Peter Crossman, and Koen Stroeken (Africa Research Centre, Louvain, Belgium), for illuminating criticism of later versions in April 2002. The text has now been published in a special issue on *African Renaissance and Ubuntu Philosophy* of the journal *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, under the editorship of Pieter Boele van Hensbroek; his editorship has also benefitted the version included in the present volume. I am indebted to that journal's editor for generous consent to include this chapter in the present book. Vernie February died while this book was in the final stages of preparation, and I dedicate this chapter to his memory.

Chapter 15, finally, is the substantially rewritten English translation of the text I presented during the inaugural ceremony when taking up the chair of intercultural philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 21 January, 1999. The text was simultaneously published as a small book: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1999, '*Culturen bestaan niet*': *Het onderzoek van Interculturaliteit als een Openbreken van Vanzelfsprekendheden*, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam: Rotterdamse Filosofische Studies. The English text was published as: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2002, '“Cultures do not exist”': Exploding self-evidences in the investigation of interculturality', *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 13: 37-114; in that connection I have been fortunate again to benefit from the stimulating editorship of Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, which was also reflected in the version included in the present book. An Italian version was published in 2002.¹ I am indebted to *Quest*'s editor for generous consent to include this chapter in the present book. Shorter English versions were presented at the Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, South Africa, 25 April 1999, and at the Conference on African Epistemologies, École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France, 17-19 May 1999; I am indebted to the participants for fruitful discussions on these occasions, and to the Trust Fund of Erasmus University for funding these trips. I have dedicated this long and ambitious chapter to my friend and colleague, the anthropologist Richard Fardon. In what was also for him an extremely busy period (during which he had to write his own inaugural address for his chair at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London) he graciously offered to undertake my share of a joint book project,² releasing me to work on my own inaugural and thus easing somewhat the great pressure that predictably accompanied my absconding from cultural anthropology and my official entry into a new discipline, intercultural philosophy.

¹ Van Binsbergen 2002e.

² Fardon *et al.* 1999.

In connection with *Intercultural Encounters* as a whole, I would like to offer thanks to four categories of people.¹

In the first place, to my wife Patricia, my children, brother and sisters, whose love has been my only constant beacon throughout the often perplexing and dangerous explorations on which this book is based – throughout, in fact, my life. I would not have stood the slightest chance of completing the arduous trajectory recorded in this book if I had not been elected to travel most of that road with Patricia, so it is to her that I lovingly dedicate this book.

Secondly, I thank those who made my periods of fieldwork in Africa into profound and unforgettable human encounters: Hasnawi bin Tahar, °Abd Allah bin °Aisa†, Ghrib bin °Aisa, Dennis Shiyowe, His Royal Highness Mwenekahare Kabambi†, Mary Nalishuwa, Diketso Keamogetswe, Smarts Gumede†, Najma bint Hassuna, Ennie Maphakwane, Rosie Mabutu (MmaNdlovu)†, Elizabeth Mabutu (MmaChakayile), Antonio Ampa, among many others.

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¹ The † indicates that the person thus marked is no longer alive, or that the group thus marked has been dissolved.

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especially its Research Group, and finally my Ph.D. and M.A. students in Amsterdam, Leiden and Rotterdam. Among those who have helped create and sustain the unique financial, logistic, institutional, and social conditions that (for better or worse) led to the present book I should gratefully single out, in the first place, the Board and the Director of the African Studies Centre, Leiden (which I have been privileged to call my intellectual home since 1977); and the Philosophical Faculty, as well as the Trust Fund, of the Erasmus University Rotterdam (my philosophical *pied-à-terre* since 1998).

PART II.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF INTERCULTURAL KNOWLEDGE
THROUGH ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORK

Chapter 1 (1969)

First religious fieldwork

On popular Islam, highlands of North-western Tunisia, 1968

1.1. Preparation

Scattered throughout the landscape on the 200-kilometre-long drive from Tunis to the capital of Tunisia's Khumīriya region, I did indeed see the white domed shrines that, as centres of the cult of saints, had played a major part in my research planning back in Holland. If you are all set to study the popular religion of North African peasants such a confirmation is quite welcome when the long-distance taxicab, in which you are sitting crammed tight with five fellow-students, is driven headlong around hairpin bends from the open plains into wooded country bearing an uncomfortable resemblance to the surroundings of Central European holiday resorts visited in childhood. The cold fog turns into rain and we find ourselves amidst the hotels and public buildings of yet another *déjà-vu*: °Ayn Draham.

After having sweated, with varying interest, over foreign language publications on socio-cultural phenomena far and near for three and a half years, without having done any empirical social research as yet, and with mounting doubt that my training within the field of anthropology was a suitable preparation for such research (or for anything at all), I was at long last allowed to take part in the research-training project that the University of Amsterdam had established in North-western Tunisia.

During a preparatory period of half a year the six prospective participants had had ample opportunity, at weekly meetings, to get acquainted with the team of four anthropologists that would be in charge: an experienced North Africanist; a younger lecturer whose brilliant, virtually completed, dissertation about India was merely proof to us that he could not in any way be knowledgeable about North Africa; and two teaching assistants who had already gone through the North African baptism of fire. In that preparatory group, we brushed up our French. We also discussed some relevant general literature, which mistakenly confirmed our suspicion that there was hardly any anthropological information available about the research area. In those days the common anthropological orientation was still quite mono-disciplinary; for instance, one hardly searched for historical sources concerning the site of one's anthropological fieldwork. We did not receive any training in how to identify and

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use bibliographies, archives, etc. Besides the physical effects caused by our first tropical injections, doubts about what would be the best equipment, and financial worries (the grant from the University would turn out to barely cover half the costs), the fear preyed on our minds that we were not preparing ourselves in the best possible way for the research project – neither academically, nor for the living conditions and the expectations of the local population regarding our behaviour out there. And so the physical and mental tribulations that – as our South Asianist kept emphasising gleefully – would afflict us with growing intensity once in Tunisia, began before we left Holland.

Much time was spent in discussing these problems. Those in charge (the senior North Africanist Douwe Jongmans and the more junior South Asianist Klaas van der Veen) convinced us (for a few hours) of the fact that they were truly unsolvable. The research-training project had opted for an individualistic set-up in the sense that, after a few weeks of collective work, each participant would be in his own village, dozens of kilometres apart from the others, and that each would be wholly responsible for his own research. Inevitably this implied enormous uncertainty, and the pretence of more effective preparation would not alter that in any way. Unforeseen contingencies would occur up to the very last day in the field. All of this did not, however, relieve us of our obligation of writing a detailed research plan before departure – and just as well because, once in the field, that research plan turned out to be extremely useful.

The human-relations aspect concerned us most of all. What the team of supervisors and previous participants told us became so distorted in our minds that during those last weeks before setting out for Tunisia our future informants, and especially the interpreters who had been recruited for us, came to appear as double-dyed liars, not to be trusted in anything; from the first moment of contact they would be expected to be only interested in our money and our equipment; they would be exceedingly unsavoury in all their manifestations, and capable of lapsing, at any given moment, into the sorts of acts of violence that had characterised the highlands on the border between Tunisia and Algeria before the colonial conquest (1881) – and which had even been the pretext offered for that conquest in the first place. As amongst novices in seclusion, the night before their initiation, the most terrifying rumours circulated.

To top off the preparatory stage, shortly before our departure we were presented with an elaborate schedule of our obligations regarding the reporting and processing of materials after the fieldwork; whereas until then any possible results of our research had been played down as unimportant.

Perhaps I was the only one who spent that final night in Holland delirious and vomiting. Perhaps it had to do with those last injections. At any rate, during my first intercontinental journey (at that time still by car and boat) to my first research location, much of this anxiety had given way to a certain touristic excitement, followed by weariness and slight disappointment. Our initial group accommodation did not exactly contribute to making the anthropology student's dream come true: a

small apartment (ugly and dreary as any comparable concrete building in Holland) was to house the six participants and all of their luggage for the first few weeks. Someone had been hired to do the cooking and the cleaning. The supervisors stayed in a nearby hotel, in what we suspected to be incomparable luxury.

1.2. Collective on-site preparation

Gradually, in well-calculated doses, Khumiriya and its inhabitants are set loose upon us. We meet the first interpreters, who live in villages in the vicinity. Contrary to our expectations, they turn out to be well-dressed, neat, intelligible and friendly. On two fascinating walks around the best known sheikhdoms (the smallest administrative unit in this region) the project leader opens our eyes to the ecology of the mountain region and its socio-cultural consequences. No more enjoying the scenery: even the most magnificent valleys turn into ‘social/economic/political units determined by natural constraints’, woodlands left intact ‘indicate the absence of springs’ (the land would have otherwise been cultivated), the signs of erosion (large parts of the mountain slopes denuded of trees, their soil exposed like open wounds by progressive landslides) are not picturesque but tragic.

The distance of non-commitment gives way to the beginnings of participant observation.

Then it is time for our first independent exercise: groups of two students and an interpreter are formed, each to map a section of Hamraya, an extensive village about two and half miles from ʿAyn Draham. Hasnāwi *bin* Tahar, the eldest interpreter at thirty-nine, will work with Pieter Tamsma and me in a part of Hamraya where he had lived the previous year with one of our predecessors, Guus Hartong.

The interpreter leads us up the mountain slopes at a rapid pace. At the edge of the forest we manage to take refuge, for half an hour or so, in a discussion about the symbols to be used on our map. The interpreter gets bored. Then the terrible moment comes when we finally have to step into Khumiri village society on our own account. Tamsma volunteers to map the highest part of the village all by himself. Hasnawi and I will focus on the lower compounds. Stumbling, I follow the interpreter into a farmyard, where he calls out to the invisible occupants, and I frantically start to pace the area for measurements while taking notes and avoiding the gaze of people appearing in a doorway. My intention is to pretend that these lonely activities are very absorbing and constitute a matter of course to me, but the feeling that what I am doing is completely insane in the eyes of the onlookers, as well as my own, gets stronger and stronger. In the end I find myself standing on a large jutting rock about sixty feet from the farmyard in an expert observer pose, but I seem to be unable to create on paper a coherent pattern out of the tangle of roads, paths, clusters of trees, huts, small plots of land, the brooks down below and the wooded slopes in the distance. I break into a cold sweat. You see now: even at the first, most simple, attempt I give myself away; I am not an anthropologist at all and will never be one

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Our South Asianist drops by and takes some of the tension away. Tamsma returns, and we are invited into a house and drink strong sweet tea. Once the people stop being faceless it actually proves possible to carry on a simple conversation through the interpreter. Ignorance of what is considered polite here does not in the least lead to immediate catastrophes: interpreter and host obligingly enlighten us. The name of '*Msjeyer* – Monsieur – Goos' (Guus Hartong) is mentioned; as 'brothers' of 'Goos' we are invited to continue his friendly relationship with the residents. The spell is broken. When we return the following day, making a map no longer poses a problem.

Then it is time for collecting census data and genealogies in the same village. Our interpreter is closely acquainted with the inhabitants and has had ample experience with the Dutch students' weird interest for long-deceased or migrated relatives. And sure enough, to our great satisfaction our informants dish up genuine and elaborate genealogies without any problems. The most impressive sections of our textbooks thus come within our reach. Because gathering this kind of information turns out to be so easy, and because we are so flabbergasted at seeing it all work, we forget that these interviews are rather tiresome for the people involved. And we are tongue-tied as soon as the conversation takes a less standardised turn. The informants are, however, very patient. And Hasnawi is very talkative in our stead. One of the interlocutors (already we exclusively refer to them as 'our informants') starts telling us about the history of his lineage and with bated breath we jot down our first real myth of origin.

Every day interviews are conducted or processed. And at nightly meetings the South Asianist (the North Africanist has gone back to Holland for a short while), impressively extemporising, points out the social-structural principles that can already be observed in our modest material and lectures us on various technical aspects of the fieldwork: dealing with the interpreter, interview techniques, taking notes, processing data systematically, recording every observation, incident and conversation into the day journal, etc.

All of this proves a great stimulus to our analytical enjoyment. We work hard and keep to strict timetables. We continually seem to be in a hurry. A few participants come down with a heavy case of research fever and keep on struggling with lengthy genealogies till the early hours of the morning, tallying up marital relationships. Why do their girlfriends have to be so far away for so long

The first letters from Holland are long in coming. And at night it is bitterly cold in the students' apartment; everyone develops a cough. Our hesitant attempts to relax seem to be looked upon with suspicion by the South Asianist and his assistant; our only day off in three weeks turns into an over-collective and over-directed school outing to the ruins of Bulla Regia, an old Roman city. Being in each others' presence continuously, night and day, starts getting on our nerves. There is hardly any co-operation or exchange of information between the twosomes, as though we are already real anthropologists, protecting our own little fieldwork area, our own data,

and as though conflicts only remain suppressed by virtue of that ‘avoidance’, a classic anthropological concept after all.¹

At the end of the last collective interview day all the participants and interpreters walk across the densely-forested slope to the VW van that will bring us back to ‘Ayn Draham. Due to what I have mistaken to be the local taboo on all reference to bodily functions, I decided to lag behind unnoticed, and the next thing I know I have lost all sight of the group. I follow the path down, running where possible, but do not catch up with my fellow researchers. When I ask a young boy if he has seen them, he of course does not understand what I am saying and directs me back up the mountain. Soon there are no paths any more; I am walking through an overgrown clearing. I am lost. And at that moment I realise I have not been alone for even one second in the past three weeks. Some of the weight of having been compulsively preoccupied for months now with the research and its preparation is finally lifted from my mind – I am in a beautiful oak forest, a brook with strange red foam flows alongside of me, there are nice little birds. I relish the silence and delight in being a tourist once again for just one moment.

But it is getting dark. I have neither map nor compass and think of the enormous wild boars that allegedly roam these forests. In my mind’s eye I see supervisors, students, interpreters and inhabitants of surrounding villages desperately searching through the night; a disaster for the whole project. I call out. After a while I hear the horn of the van being honked in the distance below, and moving towards the sound I pretty quickly meet up with the group again.

A beaming Hasnawi claims to have saved me: he was the only one to notice that ‘*Msjeyer Weem*’ was not there when they were just on the point of driving off. He is the interpreter assigned to me. He will live with me for three months in a one-room house of five (!) square meter ground area.

1.3. First days in the village

My lodging had taken quite some doing. Popular religion was seen by the Tunisian authorities as a painful symbol of the backwardness of their country since it varied considerably from the formal, although at that time rather elastic, Islam advocated by urban religious leaders. So my research subject was delicate, and the supervisors had selected an area for me to work in a sheikhdom which had been on very good terms with the project right from the start. Several students had done fieldwork there in the previous years and the population had found that research was nothing to be feared.

The area designated to me consisted of two villages situated one above the other on a mountain slope and separated by a stretch of uncultivated land. In the lower village there was a large shrine dedicated to one of the most important regional

¹ ‘Avoidance’ designates a mode of highly elusive and restrictive behaviour of individuals belonging to social categories between which strong structural tensions exist, e.g. son-in-law and mother-in-law.

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saints, Sidi Mhammad, from whom the settlement took its name. The upper village was called Mayziya. Another participant in the research project, Coen Beeker, had researched residence patterns in Sidi Mhammad in 1966, building up excellent relations with the inhabitants, which he still maintained by sending letters and parcels. As he had paid hardly any attention to Mayziya, it seemed reasonable that I should focus on that village in particular. A small house for me to live in had in fact been found in Mayziya long before my arrival. However, immediately before I was to take up my residence in the village, it appeared that this dwelling had been deemed not impressive enough by the local branch of the Tunisian unitary political party, which had then proceeded to select a house for me on the outskirts of the village of Sidi Mhammad. By local standards it was indeed grand, with a decent roof, a good lock on the door, a large yard, a clear view of the major shrine of Sidi Mhammad (he turned out to have four shrines within a radius of two kilometres) and of the Mediterranean, twelve kilometres away. To accommodate his family, the owner had no option but to build a shelter from branches and leaves elsewhere on his land. This man turned out to be, of all people, °Abd Allah bin °Aisa, the one person Beeker had particularly warned me about. I had got the most controversial figure in the village as a landlord, someone who cared little for the traditional rules, and who was the only avowed antagonist of the local sheikh (not a religious figure here, but rather a kind of mayor). This was the man who had been forced to vacate his house for me. Even our South Asianist could not do anything about it. However, although I was intimidated by °Abd Allah's big body and strong blacksmith's arms, exceptional directness of speech and compelling attitude, he turned out to have qualities of sincerity, rebelliousness, and humour that greatly endeared me to him in the long run.

With other lodgings I undoubtedly would have produced different results. Not so much on account of the disappointment of the inhabitants of Mayziya (who would also have liked to receive letters and parcels but now had to realise that all the benefits of my stay would once again go to the village of Sidi Mhammad) or my landlord's peripheral position in the village, but rather because with him, his mother and his brother (under quasi-kinship obligation to me because I too lived on the late °Aisa's land), I now proved to have some extremely intelligent informants, who had intimate knowledge of popular religion and were devoted participants in all the attending ritual activities.

My first weeks in the village were nowhere as bad as I had expected. The accommodation and lack of *modcomfs* were no problem at all: of course there was no gas, electricity or running water, nor a toilet or a shower, but all in all it was less primitive than any hike through the mountains in Europe. That my informants were able to lead a complete life without all the material achievements of my own society, and that I could adapt myself to a fair degree to their situation, I found almost edifying after a while. And besides, Hasnawi saw to it that I had my cup of plain, ordinary, Dutch light tea in the mornings – a despicable beverage in Khumiriya where tea is supposed be black, strong, syrupy and extremely sweet. He was eager to

please and to show his expertise – after all, it was his third lucrative year as interpreter for the research project.

My landlord actually seemed quite sympathetic; although it did get very much on my nerves that he had to observe closely in all detail, the very first day, whatever I was going to unpack in the way of kitchen utensils, office equipment and provisions. His house was decorated with colour photographs cut out from the popular weekly *Paris Match* (which hardly anyone in the village could read), notably a photo report of the coronation of the last Shah of Persia, and a series of cheerful photographs of a girl in varying states of undress showing what one can do with camomile prepared in various ways – washing one's hair, grooming one's face, etc. I gladly left them on the walls. They were a fitting preparation for the female breast improvement advertisements (from a similar provenance) I was soon to admire in the major shrine of Sidi Mḥammad, pinned up between the sacred flags and votive candles, right above the tomb of the saint himself.

My first scoutings around the village and surroundings yielded a wealth of fascinating information, because besides being a European and a prospective anthropologist, I was an ignorant city-dweller to boot, without any knowledge whatsoever of farming. After a few weeks those nice green blades of grass that I enthusiastically wrote home about, turned out to have developed into stalks of rye and wheat. Everywhere I only met friendly people. I made a speech in the local store-cum-men's assembly, in which I held forth on the close ties that connected me with '*Msjeyer Coon*'. Everything I said was well-received, even when I told them outright that I was interested in the local saints and their veneration. They would help me with everything, they promised, and that is exactly what happened.

As for the reaction of the population, I experienced only one really anxious moment. On the morning of my second day in the village an official of the local unemployment relief work organisation (the villagers' main source of income) came along to my little house to see Beeker's mimeographed fieldwork report, which happened to be in Dutch. The pages at which this much-feared official opened up the report contained, to my horror, tables with names of villagers and amounts of money. These tables were an innocent statement of the amount of rent they would be willing to pay if they had to move to a newly constructed village. But the official could not read Dutch (the days of massive migration from North Africa to the Netherlands had not yet started), and I feared he would misconstrue the report as an indication that I was there to serve some sinister political end. It was just these kinds of complications that the supervisors had explicitly warned us about! I realised only years later that what had prompted my visitor to beat a hasty retreat was probably not his suspicion that I had sinister intentions compromising the security of the state, but the threat of me being in the service of some higher-order officialdom which these tables represented to him.

Later that day I began the interviews. Fairly soon I got into the habit of beginning each conversation with a new informant with questions about census data and genealogies. In this way I could find out about someone's qualities as an

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informant in an area where he or she could easily supply me with answers without becoming insecure or suspicious. I had worked on these kinds of questions during the preparatory village survey at Hamraya, and could keep the conversation going even though I had hardly any sensible questions to ask yet about religion. In this way the informants got used to the interview situation (in so far as this was still new to them, after Beeker) and to talking through an interpreter while I, as an unexpected bonus, gained insight into the complicated kinship structure of Khumiri society. In the course of the research these auxiliary data proved to be more and more relevant to my main subject. Usually these genealogical exercises developed into more religion-orientated conversations after about half an hour.

I resolutely forced myself always to walk around with my notebook, bring it out and take notes, necessary or not, ridiculous or not. Within a few days everybody had become so used to this that no attention was paid any more. This hopefully eliminated the danger of my informants being able to tell from my occasional excited scribbling which spontaneous statements or actions aroused my interest, with undesirable effects on their remarks and behaviour. At the same time it also provided me with a concrete opportunity to identify with my researcher's role, which helped me to overcome a lot of diffidence.

I would continually stumble upon new aspects of the religion. I explored the first few of the dozens of shrines that I was to find in my immediate research area. After one day I was already allowed to witness a ritual slaughter and distribution of meat in honour of Sidi Mhammad. The high point of those first days was a séance (I was to experience many more) during which the local representative of the Qadīrīya brotherhood (widespread throughout the whole Islamic world), went into a trance accompanied by singing and flute and drum music, and manipulated cactus leaves with enormous spines without hurting himself, as if he were rendered invulnerable by the invisible saint that came to possess him in his trance. I was deeply moved by the experience. That night I wrote in my journal:

‘If I will be able to penetrate into the conceptual world and the motives behind all this, my stay here will have been worthwhile.’

(It proved to be just that.) My lack of interview technique hampered me more than the much-feared reticence of my informants. Even the women turned out to be surprisingly approachable. It only took a couple of weeks before our interviews with them no longer needed to be chaperoned by elders. After the first ten days I was already under the impression – completely unjustified of course – that I was beginning to comprehend somewhat the cult of saints and shrines in Khumiriya.

In those same deceptively euphoric first weeks, however, my main research instrument, my relationship with the interpreter, was almost irreparably damaged.

1.4. The interpreter

The dangers of getting into an over-friendly and over-relaxed relationship with one's interpreter had been stressed to such an extent during the preparations in Holland

and ‘Ayn Drahm, that I eagerly – in this respect it was at least clear what I had to do – apply the Western, businesslike, virtually impersonal relationship model:

‘He is being paid comparatively well to do this job, and that is that.’

I actually saw Hasnawi as a needlessly complicated instrument to amend certain bothersome, yet seemingly minor, shortcomings in my communication with the informants: the mere fact that, in spite of having studied Arabic for one and a half years, I neither understood their dialect nor had a clue as to their customs and manners. I refused to admit my total dependence on Hasnawi (though it had been over-emphasised by the supervisors), not only in terms of the language, but in fact at every step I took. And when he alluded to it (emphatically confirmed by the supervisors in his sense of being utterly irreplaceable), I flew off the handle. I accused him, sometimes even in the presence of others, of not translating everything that was being said. That he should be allowed to decide for himself what was relevant enough to translate, never entered my mind – I did not realise that the conversations we took part in, outside of the interviews, were generally of the same silly and diffuse nature as conversations in the pub, the launderette or the doctor’s waiting-room in Europe. We did not come to any normal exchange of views about the organisation of the research (*my* research) and of our stay in the village of Sidi Mḥammad. And so, while the informants gradually began to appear to me as the most fascinating and sympathetic people alive, an unbearable tension developed between Hasnawi and myself that expressed itself numerous times a day in peevish or quarrelsome remarks, alternated by irritated silences.

And that despite the fact that the poor fellow was forced to abandon his house and compound, cow and wife in order to work himself to the bone for a pittance, with only one day off a week, one-and-a-half hour’s walk away from home under the unsteady guidance of someone young enough to be his son – and work, not only as a translator (which is tiring enough) but also as a cook, cleaner, informant, PR-man and singer-musician (a specialty of Hasnawi which came in handy in the religious sphere). Even more importantly, whatever stressful burden I laid upon our working relationship, his culture demanded the most far-reaching identification between people who work, eat, drink, sleep and spend their spare time together, with a continuous exchange of gifts and services, cordialities and confidences. We had to be ‘like brothers’, or at least appear that way. Hasnawi surely had reason to complain, and that is exactly what he did in all tones of voice.

My informants of course did not fail to notice the tensions, and several marginal characters from the village (among them my landlord, i.e. my most important contact in the village next to my interpreter), aspiring to the lucrative and seemingly cushy job, came to defame Hasnawi when he was not there. I decided I had to get rid of him as soon as possible. What use was he to me anyway?

Fortunately our South Asianist was able to intervene just in time. His general anthropological insights, his fieldwork experience, and the way in which he applied these assets in his organisational contacts with the local society, more than counterbalanced his lack of specific knowledge about Khumiriya, as I began to

realise. In a number of heart-to-heart talks my shortcomings were made quite clear to me, as well as the fact that I would have to get along with Hasnawi anyway, since one was not allowed to change interpreters.

More than thirty years later, Hasnawi's way of behaving and his idiosyncratic French vocabulary have continued to be standing references, cryptic to others, in the family that I since raised. Occasionally I still have nightmares about him, even though I have meanwhile written the novel that details the story of our collaboration; the interpreter comes off a lot better in it than the young researcher.

1.5. Days of distress

After several weeks I had quite gotten over my initial exhilaration. The conflict with my interpreter had taught me (at least that is what I read in it) that fieldwork requires the researcher to be aware at all times of his own actions and of the premises on which they are based, and perpetually to keep track of how his presence influences the relationships of the people around him. These are inhumanly arduous demands, especially at the outset, when new impressions so overwhelm the researcher that he can barely take any distance from himself, can hardly predict how his behaviour will be interpreted, and is as yet unable to assess fully in which respects the society he is researching allows him to be himself, to have his own opinions and preferences, to say 'no' when he does not feel like doing something. Human life and living together require a minimum of distance, knowledge, predictability and routine. With these one has a grip on reality, and the possibility of behaving spontaneously, relying on behavioural automatisms, and being happy. I saw myself voluntarily deprived of these basic conditions and placed in a kind of laboratory simulation of the genesis of neuroses.

This had little to do with culture shock. Apart from the bloody slaughter of sacrificial animals, Khumiri society failed to shock me. Coming from a family utterly shattered by internal conflicts and abuse in a working-class neighbourhood of Amsterdam, I was not exactly handicapped by love for the dominant, bourgeois customs of my own European society – into which I had not been effectively initiated until I went to grammarschool. As an adolescent I had had the same problems of disorientation and despair vis-à-vis Dutch society that I now had amidst these Khumiri peasants. Having just turned twenty-one, I was experiencing an accelerated second puberty, and it was even more painful than the first time around.

If there was a lack of distance between me and my hosts, this was primarily due, not to Khumiri notions of privacy differing from European ones, but to my own personality, and aggravated by the professional expectations to which I considered myself to be subjected. I only realised much later that my self-imposed cramped defencelessness in the field was to a large extent due to my taking too literally the advice given by the supervisors. It was neither them nor my informants who made exorbitant demands, it was me. I saw my fieldwork as a Spartan learning strategy for humility, patience, improvisation and living with insecurity, defencelessness, and

lack of privacy. I felt I was continually dancing to the tune of my interpreter and informants, and yet still doing everything wrong. And for the first time in my life I experienced the extreme loss of ego that was henceforth to be the characteristic state of my personality in subsequent fieldwork: deprived (even more than when at home) of a sense of self-protecting boundaries around me, I learned extremely fast and without inhibitions, delivered myself wholesale to the host society without holding back any thought of self-interest (sleep, privacy, cherished beliefs), and thus learned the local culture and language at an incredible speed – but at an extreme cost.

Nothing went smoothly. My feverish attempts to discover and adhere to certain rules of interaction did not, at this stage, arise from respect or admiration for the society in which I found myself. I merely wanted to get rid of that paralysing insecurity and sense of rejection and outsidership. Every word I uttered and every gesture I made, for weeks, was consciously perceived by me as falling far short of local expectations and norms; the embarrassing stammer of my childhood came back, and I was so conscious of my every movement that my gestures became broken, like a robot's. And for weeks my every word and every gesture would be consciously aimed not so much at getting information (which gradually seemed to become less of an obsession to me) but above all at making myself acceptable in the eyes of my interpreter, informants and the team in charge of the training-project. I derived absolutely no satisfaction from my contacts in the village. I was just playing at dealing with people, but it was a terribly difficult and disagreeable game to me, and I constantly had the desperate feeling of being incapable of ever achieving any real contact with what was, after all, my immediate environment for the duration of the fieldwork. This absence of intimacy and spontaneity was all the more distressing because, except for the few minutes each day when I washed or when nature called, I was always surrounded by people. Even at night there was still the bodily presence of Hasnawi, one metre away, snoring or calling out in a nightmare, instead of my girlfriend.

For several days I experienced almost total distress. I had completely lost my sense of motivation; my research data seemed utterly worthless and meaningless. By now I knew by heart the standard commonplace phrases in which the local people described their religion:

‘We ask the saint and the saint asks Rabbi [God]’

‘the *baraka* [the divine grace emanated by the various shrines named after one and the same saint] is the same but we visit them all’, etc.

But I felt I had no insight into the system. My interview technique and my experience with analysing conceptual systems were as yet far too inadequate to draw out what was not exactly unconscious, but rarely or never needed to be put into words in normal, day-to-day life, even among the most intelligent informants. Instead of being an engaging interlocutor, I was at a loss to bring up new interesting topics at crucial moments in the conversations. And as soon as an interview seemed to be going the right way, I nevertheless irritated people (including my interpreter) through my lack of understanding of the basic social codes of their society, and my

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diffidence and inability to use their cultural idiom. Citing examples from daily life in Khumiriya, interspersing one's conversation with kinship terms, the name of God and the Prophet, profusely wishing people good health – I did not yet know how to make use of all that. However detrimental it was to the progress of my research, I was really completely tongue-tied at times, literally unable to utter a single word in whatever language, and (like at the time when I was a six-year old boy) reduced to a ridiculous stammer. My ears were ringing with the loud voices in that still almost unintelligible Arabic dialect, and I often could not see a thing in the dark huts, let alone recognise faces or take notes.

I just wandered aimlessly around the village with Hasnawi. Occasionally my depression was quite apparent even to my informants. The heavy rains and the mail that failed to arrive greatly contributed to my despair. More than once I toyed with the thought of dropping the whole affair and flying back home at the first opportunity; I had never been in an airplane though. Who wanted to be an anthropologist anyway – juvenily, I still believed that my first career priority was to be a literary writer, who (gold-digger fashion) would devote his entire adult life to erecting an eternal written monument of genius to his unhappy childhood. At those instances little but the shame of being a failure in the eyes of my friends and loved ones back home kept me from running away. Next came daydreams about horrible illnesses, real or faked if necessary, that could only be cured in a well-equipped Dutch hospital and that would therefore swiftly and without loss of face release me from my ordeal. Any falling back on the supervisors was out of the question at that point in time, as the South Asianist had just gone back home and the North Africanist had not yet returned from Holland.

The turning-point of this crisis remains in my memory as the most important moment of my fieldwork. We had slept badly as usual because of the enormous quantities of strong tea we were forced to drink – a possible physiological factor in my distress. After breakfast I listlessly followed Hasnawi's suggestion to make an interview in Mayziya that morning, where the eldest informants of my research area lived. The forested stretch of land between the two villages afforded ample opportunity for reflection. At first I was once again seized with the panic of the previous days, but after a few hundred steps I all of a sudden decided, with a clarity of mind that I had not been capable of since my arrival in the village, to keep a stiff upper lip from now on and to make the best of the sizable investment of time, energy, frustration and money that my participation in the research project had already cost me and others. Why this sudden determination? It was not the first time that I made a cost/benefit analysis of the stressful fieldwork situation I found myself in, but so far such an analysis had not been able to lift my depression, on the contrary. Maybe the gentle spring rain reminded me of Holland and made me feel at home. I had trudged up the slope to Mayziya before, but this time leaving the strip of forest behind and setting foot on the open fields of this other village meant shedding all fear. Behind me spread the valley of Sidi Mhammad in all its glory. Across the valley, the mountain range that sealed it off towards the West seemed to have

receded further away and was no longer threatening. I felt relaxed when we reached the farmyards of Mayziya. The interview was pleasant and interesting. I stopped stammering. Food was served and we took the youngest son back home with us to give him some Band Aid for his cousin who had been butted by a ram while we were there.

A few days later the supervisor of the project appeared in my yard, wearing a parka and a woollen cap as if we were not in Africa. He had braved the sharp-edged, newly cut stones of the metalled roads, recently built by the unemployment relief work organisation, in his small Citroën Dyane car, in order to deliver my mail and take out time for the long, intense and immensely stimulating scientific discussions that – repeated once every two weeks from that point on – were to be the backbone of my first fieldwork. The link with my own world had been re-established. I also could not have wished for a better guide to the North African world than Douwe Jongmans. Against the background of his vast cultural knowledge of the region and of the subcontinent as a whole, he grabbed hold of the specific raw data I provided hesitantly, and juggled them *virtuoso* so as to prompt me to formulate provisional theories and generalisations, while, in that yard with a view of the shrine of Sidi Mhammad and the distant Mediterranean, Hasnawi and my landlord looked on whispering in awe.

1.6. From field data to theory, and back

The main problem of fieldwork, from the point of view of scientific knowledge production, is the enormous distance that exists between the observations and statements the researcher is confronted with, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the generalisations he has to build on the basis of those raw data – generalisations that moreover, abstracting from the concrete ethnographic data, have to be relevant in the light of some fundamental theory or other. And while these problems of operationalisation, relevance and synthesis are already tough enough in the case of an extended field project of several years' duration, they are virtually insurmountable in the case of a research training project of only a few months, without thorough theoretical or regional preparation and with no time to let everything sink in and take an analytical distance.

By now, though, the Khumiri material was no longer totally new and strange to me. I was particularly struck by the many similarities between Khumiri popular religion and the Roman Catholicism with which I had been brought up. In many respects the basic concept of North African religion, *baraka*, corresponds with the Catholic concept of 'divine grace'. Many details of the cult of saints (the burning of candles in niches in little white chapels, incense, prayer postures, the eating of consecrated cakes) and some features of the religious brotherhoods seemed very familiar to me. In part this can be attributed to a common cultural origin: both Islam and Christianity originate from the same Mediterranean cultural area; Khumiri popular religion is partly rooted in religious modes that are widespread throughout

the Mediterranean and much older than these world religions (so that *baraka* corresponds with the Hebrew *barūk*), and the inhabitants of North Africa and Southern Europe have belonged to the same or closely related political units for much of the past two thousand years. This parallelism had both advantageous and disadvantageous implications for the research. Because of my background I was perhaps able to penetrate more quickly into some aspects of Khumiri religion than would have been possible without my experience with a kindred religion. It is quite likely though that I let myself be unduly influenced by my background, especially in defining the conceptual content and in interpreting the phenomena I encountered in a wider social context.¹

I had no doubts that at some time, later, behind my faraway desk, I would be able to write a decent report about my research. But that was by no means my most important incentive for working hard. When I was not engaging with people, I was defenceless against the social and sexual frustrations of the fieldwork situation. Which was one of the reasons why I hardly ever got around to working out data or (in line with local custom which we had been advised to adopt) taking naps in the afternoon: I just could not bear to.

And after a few weeks again, the data collection, and my interaction in Khumiri society, became more than a means to control my panic. As I dug deeper into the world of my informants, I finally started to enjoy every new step that brought me closer to an understanding of increasingly complicated situations and ideas. In the field, with the living material almost too close for comfort around me, and in the fruitful contact with experienced researchers, I figured I was beginning to comprehend what after all I had already been studying for several years: human interaction, its complicated manifestations and interrelationships, the tension between expectations and evaluation from various sides, the place of relatively fixed factors such as norms, collective representations and material objects, conscious choices and such restrictions of choice as were, unconsciously, imposed upon the informants by their social environment. I was still a long way off from problems of power, social change, the interplay between heterogeneous semantic, social and economic systems within one field of interaction, corporeality, self-reflection and interculturality— later to become the predominant themes of my scholarly work – but I nevertheless was starting to feel like an anthropologist. It was the decade when transactionalism was introduced into anthropology, and in keeping with the times I was fashionably disillusioned, in the field, with a social science that in the main seemed to aim at abstractions about enormous aggregates of people, kin groups, clans, ethnic groups, classes, genders (and that applied these abstractions with a tendency to reification), but that appeared to have no finely differentiated concepts which were of use in the field for the more or less inchoate, ephemeral micro-phenomena at the individual human interaction level. Yet these micro-phenomena

¹ The imposition of Christian theological models in the ethnography of African religion and thought is a recognised distortion of African religion studies; cf. Okot p'Bitek 1970.

appeared to me to be anthropology's main source of material, and the very essence of the informants' lives.

Nonetheless, I could not avoid working towards macro abstractions and in this the existing Grand Theory proved to be much more of a support (thanks to the research plan I had drawn up back in Holland and the discussions with the supervisor) than I was willing to admit. Studying theories of religion (especially those of Émile Durkheim) had put me on the track of a number of fundamental problems regarding societal integration and the relationship between religious and non-religious organisational structures; and had given me a new perspective on a problem that had occupied me as a literary writer ever since adolescence: the relationship between symbol and that which it refers to. Although Durkheim hitched his splendid generalisations (according to which each society essentially worships itself in its religion) somewhat unfortunately on to the distant and, in those days, ill-understood societies of Australian Aborigines, there was nevertheless a direct connection between those generalisations and the Mediterranean popular religion I was studying: through Robertson Smith's *Religion of the Semites* (1889) that had been Durkheim's main influence when writing his *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse* (1912).¹ Despite the limitations imposed by Durkheim's idealism, transposed back into the Mediterranean region the relevance of those basic tenets became more and more clear to me in the field, and this was very encouraging. Saints indeed proved to be direct symbols of the kin groups and neighbourhoods that venerated them; groups identified and differentiated themselves from others by erecting their own shrines; the ascent and decline of shrines coincided with the political and demographic rise and fall of local groups; and I was even gradually able to decode legends about saints as more or less historical statements about the settlement history of various kin groups.

The eagerness with which I occasionally imagined seeing confirmations of Durkheim's theories around me as embodied in the ideas and interactions of my informants, was also of course due to the pressure under which I lived. I needed to come back with substantial results, and time was running out. I flattered myself with the thought that the concrete, highly quantifiable material I was collecting would be solid enough to go beyond whatever chimerical notions might have crept into my vision of Khumiri religion, and to end up with scientific hypotheses, occasionally with empirical underpinning and all. I especially relied upon my elaborate card index system of data, conjectures, hypotheses and ideas. Toward the end of the fieldwork I used this body of data to formulate a limited number of concrete questions for a questionnaire survey among all adult women of Sidi Mḥammad and Mayziya. I proudly worked towards what I then still envisioned as my scientific ideal: a conclusive statistical analysis of miscellaneous forms of local religious behaviour – so that I would ultimately be able to predict with certainty, for every female inhabitant of Sidi Mḥammad, which four or five of the many dozens of local shrines

¹ Robertson Smith 1927; Durkheim 1912.

she visited, and why; or so that I could explain, by reference to such factors as affluence, political power, order of birth and family tradition, why, and which, thirty per cent of the local men were to be recruited as ecstatic dancers, *i.e.* members of the local Islamic brotherhoods.¹

Now, of course, I can see that with this emphasis on statistics and model building I opted for the mere surface of religious phenomena; but it was a strategically correct choice because I lacked both time and training for more in-depth research into the symbolic and deep-psychological aspects of the cult of saints.

Moreover, I was merely in the process of seeking entrance into the anthropological profession, and was not yet in a position to challenge its scientific misconceptions. While myself undergoing considerable violence (from the part of the village population, the project organisation, and the interpreter) during my professional initiation, I saw no option but to naïvely inflict, from my part, the violence of appropriation and representation upon the host society, – a likely target, since it was the most vulnerable of the three categories of oppressors during my first fieldwork. The professional violence I underwent subconsciously reactivated such violence as I had been exposed to in my childhood. When the initial crisis had subsided and my fieldwork was clearly going to be a success, I yet became tormented by terrible nightmares in which a dark human shape threatened me; the local Qur’anic teacher and diviner (*madhab*) consulted his magical book and told me it was not a saint but a troubling ancestor. A keen awareness of the violence of fieldwork was to remain part of my professional identity, generating (as exposure to violent situations may do) libidinous fascination for and self-effacing dedication in fieldwork, but also profound fear and repugnance, and by and large it was a major source of my lasting professional ambiguity as an anthropologist. When twenty years later (twenty years of recurrent nightmares about Hasnawi) I wrote a novel on Khumiriya, Hasnawi after much soul-searching on my part came out rather gloriously; but when again fifteen years later I arranged once more a meeting with him, I was so tense that I sprained my back on the way to his village, and for days could only walk bent double, with a stick I had picked up by the Tunisian roadside.

1.7. Relations with the villagers

After our initial clash Hasnawi and I occasionally still had our problems. He had definite ideas as to the desired procedure of things, based on his experience with previous project participants, and I could not always bring myself to conform. But I was now more quickly aware of any hitches, and from the growing insight into Khumiri society afforded to me (through my interpreter!), I was able to glean strategies to obviate such friction. I got to know something about the complex, semi-

¹ For the realisation of this scientific ideal, cf. van Binsbergen 1985b. Of course, the whole thrust of this book is that I no longer subscribe to such an ideal. For my other publications based on the Khumiri research, cf. van Binsbergen, 1980a, 1980b, 1988a, and forthcoming (c); van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a.

conscious methods by which people in Khumiriya (as in every society) can satisfactorily comply with the demands that close relationships impose on them and can nonetheless keep pursuing their individual goals.

But not only was I becoming more aware of the roles played by my interpreter, his expectations regarding me (that I had initially completely disappointed), and the social resources at my disposal to manipulate this field of forces, I also began to realise what tremendous sacrifices he was making for my sake. I really came to value him a lot, in spite of his incessant whining (about what an exemplary life he led, how wicked some other people were – especially other interpreters, how much I owed him), his sometimes really inexplicable moodiness, his irritating, noisy bustling about early in the morning and his modest forms of blackmail. He gradually managed to get me somewhat accustomed to the local rural rhythm of life in which the time around noon, and the evening, are not meant for work. Once I had emphatically accepted this principle he put up with the fact that the social musical evenings which we found arranged for us almost on daily basis, invariably turned into ‘work’ for us – and Hasnawi perhaps made his greatest contribution to the research on those evenings, while putting in double overtime as both an interpreter and a singer-musician. He kept giving me ever more detailed advice about how I could protect myself from the continuous assaults on my health by natural and supernatural forces and beings. And also on my part, my continually vocalised concern for his health (part of the local cultural idiom I had finally picked up) was no longer just pretended civility.

Hasnawi had considerable influence on the course of the research, even besides his increasingly exemplary role during the interviews and musical evenings. Just like me, he was haunted by the fear of failure. Although he did not have to pass any academic examinations, he was scared to lose his well-paid job as an interpreter and to fail in the eyes of his environment. We constantly had to work, and he thought real work exclusively meant conducting interviews. If I stayed home in the daytime to work out notes he became restless and insufferable, so we quickly set out for the village once again. I often felt forced to comply with his wishes, even when they did not seem conducive to an efficient and comprehensive gathering of material. But I could ill-afford a second crisis with my interpreter even less than a day lost. However, often his suggestions turned out to be valuable. In this, too, my opportunism gradually gave way to trust. While I learned to rely more on Hasnawi, he started taking a lot more pleasure in his work. After a while we really worked together ‘like brothers’, as the indigenous ideology stipulated.

The definitive sign of accomplishment in our relationship was when he (greatly weakened in the last weeks of our work just as I was because of bad water, lack of fresh vegetables, and the nocturnal religious and musical séances) did not any longer blame his ailments on the hard work I made him do, but on the Evil Eye that certain of our informants in a neighbouring village had cast upon him, ‘out of jealousy about his highly honourable position as an interpreter’!

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But all my good will, or the advice of the supervisors, or Hasnawi's devotion, would not have accomplished anything if my informants had not been so incredibly helpful and hospitable. Once I had got rid of my initial tension and fear, I insisted on being one of them for the duration of the project. They rewarded me with a wealth of data of course, and that was exciting and instructive. But even more important during those last few weeks was that I felt at home in the village, having gratifying relationships with dozens of people whose ideas and way of life no longer were quite so alien to me anymore and who in many ways even had become dear to me. I could also carry on simple conversations now without my interpreter's help. The villagers' facial expressions and gestures conveyed something to me, and sometimes I was even able to catch their humour. Much to my surprise I now and then adopted their imagery, even their prejudices.

But up till the very last days, my heart sank each time when I walked the few kilometres from the motor road to Sidi Mḥammad after a short visit to ʿAyn Drahām for supplies and for the regular vitamin-B shots that kept me going.

It was a great pleasure to be allowed to take part in the leisure time activities of my informants, especially since the music that was a regular feature at those gatherings greatly appealed to me. For me, as a researcher of the local religion, pleasure was combined with business, as love-songs were lightheartedly alternated with sacred songs, some in honour of the Prophet, others to accompany the ecstatic dances in honour of the local saints. I was thus able to take a relative view of at least one of my Durkheimian premises. For at variance with the theory, my informants by no means treated the supernatural with the utmost respect that Durkheim presents as the basis of societal order. If Sidi Mḥammad was *jadna* ('our grandfather') he was treated, seldom with awe, but mostly with the jocular, affectionate intimacy which characterises the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren in many societies. If there was any dancing, I had to dance along with the villagers and was given directions as to how it was done. What more effective way is there to get to understand the ecstatic dances' bird symbolism, of which most local people were no longer aware, and which I have now reason to believe were thousands of years old.¹ At first these dances took place at people's homes, in front of a small group of men, but at the spring festival of Sidi Mḥammad I had to dance for half an hour, in honour of Him, with the best dancers from the vicinity, while two hundred onlookers watched approvingly. By that time I had completely overcome my initial stage fright and I played my role of researcher and of temporary Khumiri with gusto.

At a party I had a cordial letter to my girlfriend dictated to me by the village elders, with the prediction that I would be so 'strong' after all the sexual abstinence imposed by the fieldwork that a son would be born to us soon after my arrival, at the intercession of their and my 'grandad' Sidi Mḥammad. Much to my happiness it turned out to be a daughter, but she did get a Tunisian name. She visited the shrine while still in the womb and there undoubtedly was filled with *baraka*. At another

¹ Van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

party I was joined in mock-marriage with the youngest daughter of Uncle Salah: the climax of merry deliberations about an effective way to present my girlfriend in Holland with the *fait accompli* of a Khumiri co-wife, and meanwhile provide my Khumiri father-in-law with three Dutch girls who would have to be less 'closed' than his own middle-aged wife.

I eagerly, at first over-eagerly, ate and drank everything that was offered to me. During the fieldwork preparations in Europe much attention had been paid to the social implications of food and food sharing as part of our fieldwork strategies. We were made well aware of the 'Miss Ophelia complex' – named after the White lady from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*¹ who has the best of intentions towards the 'darkies' but shies at any normal physical contact. I was convinced that with that food and drink I also, almost tangibly, ingested the culture of, and relationships with, the Khumiri people. I was usually grateful for their hospitality and lightheartedly took the risk of a infection with tuberculosis or any of the other terrible diseases that some of the villagers suffered from; my tropical injections, and Sidi Mḥammad, would protect me. Through my unreserved eating behaviour I indeed prepossessed people in my favour. And not to forget: a good part of the food was consecrated to a local saint, and by eating it I entered into a relationship with this supernatural being that has apparently been propitious for my work and later life. In fact, with my wife I have continued to consecrate meals of *kouskous* and *ḥalāl* (ritually pure) meat to Sidi Mḥammad in my home once every few months for more than thirty years now, with appreciably salutary effects.

Besides all the large and small feasts, we were almost daily invited to have dinner somewhere. The obligation of hospitality called for an elaborate meal, with expensive meat, and consequently I often had the feeling that the kindness shown to me by my hosts had 'eaten up' their whole week's budget. By organising a few feasts myself I was fortunately able to do something in return. It was not only neighbourly love, however, that weighed upon me. In the form of dinner invitations to Hasnawi and me, all sorts of rivalry was being fought out, over our heads, between my informants (belonging to different families, kin groups, factions, neighbourhoods, village, clans, sheikhdoms); and more than once this got us into problems. Although these invitations resulted in fruitful situations for casual interviews and observations, they were not always opportune, either because we wanted to do something else; or because the intimate, almost sacred bond that sharing a meal creates in Khumiriya, seemed undesirable to us with regard to the particular person who was inviting us; or because we already had had to stuff down a large meal elsewhere only an hour before. Refusing food and drink that is offered to you is, however, socially impossible in this region, and the host mercilessly takes care that his guest consumes huge quantities. So we often overate ourselves, an unusual but great sacrifice for the sake of scientific knowledge. When I returned to Holland I was overweight for the first (but not the last) time in my life.

¹ Beecher-Stowe 1981.

It was particularly satisfying to me when my landlord on one of the last days of my stay in the village, and in the presence of others at that, refused the tea I offered him. This vicious attack – transgression of the same code that had forced me to consume all those tons of food and hectolitres of boiled tea – I was going to riposte! It turned into a big argument that I participated in with concealed irony and in which my landlord remained just as sympathetic in my eyes as he had gradually become. Hasnawi and I became ‘the winning party’, according to the local rules of the game, by crushing our opponent under a shower of gifts. I presented the landlord with all the fieldwork equipment that he had (unjustifiably) feared he would not get when I left, and that was why he started the whole row in the first place.

1.8. Towards understanding

Three weeks before my departure I had progressed to the point where I could pierce through the local commonplaces about religion and was somewhat able to reach what lay beneath the surface.

The method I had followed in the first weeks – its shortcomings had definitely been a factor in my initial distress – consisted in trying to elicit statements about indigenous concepts from my informants. This I did by asking as vaguely and elliptically formulated questions as possible, jotting down the statements thus provoked as best I could. However, I scarcely absorbed mentally these concepts until near the end – before that time they did not become my intellectual property but remained mere data filed for further use. In this way their content slipped from me right there and then: I did not bother to really try to understand and use the Khumiri world view during the interviews, but hoped to distil a correct and coherent system from all those (seemingly) conflicting statements by comparing them with each other once I had returned to Holland. It was like mindlessly collecting words and phrases among an exotic group of native speakers in order to learn their language or reconstruct its structure after coming back home, instead of trying to master that language on the spot and from the inside, in continuous contact with the speakers. It was a superficial and unreliable method that caused irritation: much to their despair, informants were urged, for the first time in their life, to give abstract general definitions of their religious concepts, and they were baffled when, during a subsequent interview, it appeared that I still did not understand anything at all. My insistent but incoherent questioning gave them the impression (partly correct, I am ashamed to admit now) that I never listened to them carefully, and thought they were lying or holding back information.

With the help of the project supervisor Douwe Jongmans I finally came to a better approach. When confronted with a context sketching a concrete and potentially real-life, albeit hypothetical, situation, informants usually were capable of giving an indication of the limits of their conceptions – what was still considered *baraka* and what was not, for instance – even though they were unable to define a concept in a positive and abstract sense. Confronted with hypothetical cases that

were recognisable to them (these cases were invented between the project leader and myself), they proved able to pursue an abstract line of thought – even though they could not spontaneously describe to me the connections between various concepts and activities. From among the unspecific local commonplace statements on religious behaviour that I by then knew by heart, I deduced statements about concrete situations. The informants turned out to be able to assess these statements without difficulty, either as being correct and inherent to the system, or as incorrect, nonsensical or offensive, and in this way my insight into the system was gradually being tested and adjusted, which enabled me to penetrate into evermore complicated interrelated structures.

Hasnawi and I pursued our best informants for days with questions about the specific forms of *baraka* that various fictitious sacrifices to different local saints, in all sorts of floridly imagined situations of ritual obligations and misfortune, would yield to us, in various hypothetical roles as pater familias, village elder, female leader, poor widow, a woman recently married into a family, a childless woman of forty, etc. And at long last, with affirmative nods of mutual understanding, the informants gave us concrete answers instead of the hermetic and tautological commonplaces of the first weeks.

The method worked, especially because Hasnawi and I were by now so well-attuned to each other that we could make people feel at ease during increasingly consistent, pleasant, and well-prepared interviews. Working with an interpreter was hardly a handicap any longer. The connections that I had previously been probing for with the aid of purposely vague questions now became clear to me, and my informants were visibly relieved that I finally appeared to gain a measure of understanding and insight, and that I showed this, not only by producing statements about their religion which they could increasingly recognise as relevant and correct, but also by publicly adopting the observable practices of this religion with rapidly increasing competence.

Although the relatively simple tracing of concrete facts from the present and the past continued all through the last phase of my research, I then focused on the values and concepts behind the facts. The result was fairly satisfactory, considering my lack of experience and the limited amount of time at my disposal.

1.9. Beyond objectifying knowledge

The fervour with which I had initially searched for ways of getting to grips with my interpreter and informants in order to alleviate my distress and defencelessness, equalled the disgust I felt when towards the end of my stay I had mastered some of those ways and was actually at times capable of effectively manipulating people towards the realisation of my research goals. I felt like a hypocrite when my sweet-mouthed talk proved effective to get Hasnawi going again, even though he was justifiably exhausted, or when my invocations of God and the Prophet's blessings proved good for a further extension of an already lengthy interview with informants

anxious to return to their more productive activities. But time pressed – if I was to become an anthropologist I could not afford to return from the field empty-handed.

The villagers began to reveal things they apparently would rather have kept secret. Thus they enabled me to complete my most important case histories, such as that of Khadusha, the daughter of Mansur, a penniless ecstatic dancer who lived out his life as a share-cropper with the sheikh's family into which his sister had married. Owing to a ritual transgression, the daughter was believed to have come into conflict with the local saint Sidi Mḥammad (who naturally was still as invisible and dead as ever), which in her case expressed itself in acute paralytic seizures. I already suspected that all this was a reflection of a kinship conflict between her family of origin and the family into which she had married in Khadayriya, two valleys away. She was alleged to have thoughtlessly killed a cock in honour of a local saint in Khadayriya, although she had at first dedicated the same cock to Sidi Mḥammad. This Khadayri saint was probably Sidi Salima, who in a major myth of origin was depicted as initially Sidi Mḥammad's master, until he had to admit his servant's superiority as a saint.¹ We had heard the rumour about Khadusha's predicament, but wanted to get this important piece of information straight from the horse's mouth. Several courtesy visits had only yielded evasive answers. Finally, we took the son of Mansur's sister – Jilani, a boy of my age – into our confidence. When he accompanied us on our umpteenth courtesy call he made such a quasi-accidental, but irrevocable, slip of the tongue that Mansur could no longer escape the net of clever questions that Hasnawi now gleefully pulled over him.

Till then I had conscientiously, and at the first indication, respected the limits that the villagers set to the flow of information. But it was evident that in their own dealings with each other they overstepped and manipulated these limits all the time, and I began to learn the rules that went with this game. After all, most of the information I wanted to get was, far from being secret, common knowledge among the villagers themselves. Contrary to accepted wisdom with regard to social research in Islamic societies, my most important informants, as a male researcher, were women, and I could count literally all female inhabitants of both villages (Sidi Mḥammad and Mayziya) among my informants.

Although, after more than thirty years, I can still recall in detail the landscape of Sidi Mḥammad, the names of the people, their faces and their social and kinship relations to one another, I have since had much more intense and prolonged experiences of other fieldwork in other cultures with a more conscious, personal and radical commitment on my part. In Sidi Mḥammad, I hardly overstepped any other limits than the existentially least important ones: I could manipulate people with culturally specific words and gestures for goals that were alien to them (the pursuit of scientific knowledge, my own career), and thus I gained my own personal access to local public knowledge. Conspiring with Hasnawi and being elated with the scientific results, I did not realise how meagre the yield was from a human point of

¹ Van Binsbergen 1980a.

view. After my initial struggle to find a way into Khumiri culture, at such moments I was already dangerously close to the exit again. And in the distance that my effective social manipulation brought about, my hosts' material poverty and the medical needs that had previously escaped my notice (or which I had not deemed of any importance as long as I had still felt I was at their mercy), were suddenly driven home to me. The scales fell from my eyes, as in the Garden of Eden after the Fall of Man, and I saw 'my informants' in their 'true colours': with their frayed blue overalls issued to them by the unemployment relief work organisation, without shoes, with empty storage tables in their huts, coughing, slouching along – people who were willing to shed all dignity as soon as the possibility of working as an immigrant worker in Holland was mentioned. With culturally specific gestures and phrases I finally had a hold over them: I could produce the social mimicry of being one of them; but whereas for them the horizon of their aspirations and achievements coincided with the imposing mountain ranges sealing the valley of Sidi Mhammad, my own ulterior motives propelled me beyond their small and poor world, to global academic production, to ultimately an academic income equal to the sum total of that of all householders in the entire valley, to North Atlantic middle-class patterns of expenditure and security. But what was the more authentic phase in our contact? Initially, when I was still stumbling along in hopelessly ineffective communication, or towards the end, when I could use their own social devices for the benefit of a form of global knowledge production they had never invited in the first place?

Anthropology is more than just a sublimated form of sleuthing or espionage. The increasingly effective collaboration with Hasnawi, the very specific nature of verbal communication in North Africa – where every sentence is, even more than elsewhere, a maze of multiple meanings and references, and above all of contradictions and gradations of the truth – and also my position of dependency as a trainee-researcher in this particular case, drove me across boundaries that I have since approached differently in my later research. When, in subsequent fieldwork elsewhere in Africa, I kept being drawn to those boundaries and often managed to cross them, my primary concern was a much more wide-ranging longing for personal contact (more specifically: longing for acceptance of myself as a person by the initially all-powerful, because locally culturally competent, other), rather than mere scientific curiosity. Not the clever mimicry of an acquired local idiom, but an absolutely vulnerable attitude on my part, abandoning scientific instrumentality, became the condition for such boundary-crossing. The researcher emerged, not as the Faustian manipulator, but as the receptive collaborator of his informants in the production of such intersubjective intercultural knowledge as could be mediated to the global domain of international anthropology.

I was still a long way off from that attitude during my first fieldwork. I was too young, too frightened of the possibility of academic failure, too obsessed with knowledge for knowledge's sake, and had not yet reflected upon the obvious conflict between scientific and human priorities – in my personal life, as well as in my dealings with people from another culture. And besides, the preparatory phase and

the supervision of the research-training project had emphasised the strategic rather than the existential aspects of the anthropological intercultural encounter. Apart from being touched by the harmonious Khumiri vision of nature, life and fertility – and (in the chastest, most brotherly, most respectful possible way) by the disturbingly glorious incarnation of that vision: Najma *bint* (daughter of) Hassuna, married into Sidi Mḥammad from Hamraya, only a few years older than I was but already (like my own mother) the radiant mother of four children – apart from these human elements slipping in despite my cramped scientific self, I did not get much beyond manipulation during my first fieldwork. And yet, that last night in Sidi Mḥammad, after the ritual slaughter of my calf as a sacrifice to the local saint, after the last musical evening, when towards midnight I stumbled along the familiar cacti hedges to the car that was waiting for me, suddenly old Aunt Umborka (Mansur's sister and Jilani's mother) darted out of the shadows. She had been waiting for me, far away from the festive commotion, in order secretly to give me a motherly farewell kiss, and this time not the formal kiss on the hand that is the customary way people in Khumiriya greet each other, but a big smack right on my mouth.

Thus my first fieldwork ended in real contact. When I began to analyse the material I had collected, the instrumental, manipulative side continued to dominate, and by quantifying and abstracting the field data I managed to fulfil in my report the scientific ambitions I had at that time. And yet, in the following decades, the existential side of my first extensive intercultural encounter kept seeking an outlet in my life. Perhaps this tension explains why I have continued to cling to the ethnographic data and to the memories from Khumiriya in a much stronger manner than would be warranted by the length of my stay or the significance of the data that I brought back home. My two-volume English manuscript on Khumiri society and religion is still (but, Sidi Mḥammad willing, not for long) sitting on a shelf, unpublished for lack of patience to finish its final editing and bibliographical updating, and for being distracted by an avalanche of later projects that show the maturity, not the infancy, of my scholarship. My eldest child had to be named Najma (Nezjma) as a promise that my first existential celebration of otherness across cultural (and simultaneously gender) boundaries might yet grow up and become articulate. And the title of the novel that Khumiriya has finally yielded to me, *Opening up a Belly* (1988),¹ does not only refer to the bloody sacrifices I had to witness and stage, and to the occult information that also in Khumiriya is read from the entrails of sacrificial animals (the anthropologist obtains his insights in a similar way), but also to a birth – as if upon second thoughts the cliché-like comparison of fieldwork with initiation, and of initiation with rebirth² really holds true in this case.

¹ Van Binsbergen 1988a.

² Cf. van Gennep 1909.

Can anthropology become the theory of peripheral class struggle?

Reflections on the work of Pierre-Philippe Rey

2.1. Introduction

Among the Marxist-inspired anthropologists of the 1970s and 1980s, Pierre-Philippe Rey was primarily known as a theoretician of the articulation of modes of production. His work offered some of the most penetrating analyses of the conditions and mechanisms by means of which an encroaching capitalist mode of production manages, or fails, to impose itself upon the non-capitalist societies of the Third World, foremost Africa. However, underlying these specific theoretical contributions was a more general conception, of the nature and project of anthropology and of the political role of the anthropological researcher in the class struggle of Third World peasants and proletarians. It is this overall orientation that I shall examine in the present chapter. The discussion of Rey's view of anthropology as the theory of class struggle in the periphery of the contemporary capitalist world system will lead us to consider the ideological nature of anthropology; the specific constraints and potentialities of modern anthropological fieldwork; the ways in which relations of intellectual production in anthropology itself influence, reflexively, our understanding of such relations of production as we study in our capacity as anthropologists; and finally Rey's own contributions to the empirical study of ideology. Thus the strengths as well as the limitations of Rey's proposals will be brought out as an incentive to further develop the inspiration his work offers us, in reflecting on the political and ethical side of intercultural encounters in knowledge production.

2.2. Anthropology as ideological production

In the heyday of Marxist anthropology, Pierre-Philippe Rey's work¹ made inspiring reading. Few anthropologists are similarly capable of presenting an analysis of African local societies in such terms as to make them directly relevant to the pressing problems of sociological theory and praxis in the North Atlantic society from which the great majority of anthropologists is drawn. In the way Rey depicts the African people he studies, they unmistakably inhabit the same world as he himself and his readers, albeit at different parts of the globe and under significantly different conditions; and they face basically the same problem as people in the contemporary North Atlantic region do: how to cope with a world whose productive, political and ideological processes are increasingly shaped by the capitalist mode of production.

Rey's work was unprecedented in that it provided original solutions for a number of dilemmas pervading debates among Africanists and left-wing intellectuals from the late 1960s. Whilst demonstrating the impact of colonialism and capitalism, he does not turn a blind eye to such forms of exploitation as defined antecapitalist² modes of production in Africa, and in fact his main theoretical contribution concerns the problem as to how these various forms of exploitation, both local and imported, are linked up to one another. While offering adequate (if somewhat too generalised) monographic descriptions of African societies (in Congo-Brazzaville and Northern Togo), on every page of his published work he insists on an explicitly theoretical treatment – rather than simply polishing up his ethnography with eclectic theoretical footnotes as is so often done in anthropology. Further, it is admirable how little entrenched Rey is as an Africanist. Not only do his actors produce, interact and think like human beings rather than being presented as essentialised Africans; his African societies turn out to be located in an analytical universe that encompasses, among many other things, intercontinental migrant labour to modern France, the history of capitalism in the North Atlantic region, Nambikwara kinship structures from South America,³ oriental despotism,⁴ and the history of historical materialist thought from pre-Marxism right through to Althusser. Most importantly, against the political paralysis and guilt feelings of so many left-wing anthropologists at the time (who are aware of poverty and oppression among their Third World informants but cannot think of anything more meaningful to offer the latter than their obscure academic writings), Rey sees his work as the production of an anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois ideology, developing a theory of the class struggle of African peasants and

¹ Rey 1971, 1973, 1978; Rey *et al.* 1976; and numerous articles.

² Antecapitalist simply means preceding capitalist forms in time, without claiming the evolutionist implications inherent in the term precapitalist. Antecapitalist should not, of course, be confused with anti-capitalist, the latter denoting an ideology which opposes the forms of domination inherent in the capitalist mode of production and thus tied to the time frame coinciding with, not preceding, capitalism.

³ Lévi-Strauss 1949.

⁴ Wittfogel 1957.

proletarians, and thus providing the insights by which their struggle may be strengthened, may learn from earlier struggles, and may ultimately be successful. Implied in all his writings is the hope that his analytical work will enlighten those fighting against peasant oppression, against exploitation and discrimination of migrant workers, and against the arrogance of the exploitative state bureaucracy that has emerged in African societies. His brand of Marxist anthropology seeks to render these struggles better informed, better focused and more effective. Thus Rey (along with some of his colleagues) actively joined the cause of African migrants in France.¹ A more inspiring solution for the dilemma of intellectual embourgeoisement and for the sense of paralysed inefficacy then so deeply felt among left-wing intellectuals could hardly be proposed.

Rey's stance on anthropology as ideology is clearly located within the intellectual climate of France immediately after the anti-authoritarian contestation in French academic life in May 1968, and as far as Africa is concerned still echoes – in his belief in a viable and ultimately successful class struggle by African peasants and proletarians – something of the hope that characterised North Atlantic intellectual thinking in general about the African continent in the 1960s and early 1970s. The changes in intellectual climate ever since combine with Rey's own intellectual and career developments. However, he still considers the class struggle of African peasants and proletarians as *both the source and the aim of Africanist research*; and he still tries to emulate this view in his current societal practice as an intellectual worker.

Rey has been extremely fortunate in that his first fieldwork, in the Mossendjo area, Congo-Brazzaville, could be conducted in close association with practical Marxist revolutionaries in the area. He tells me² he did not enter the field as a Marxist theoretician³ but he certainly emerged from it as one. When, in the postface of *Les Alliances de Classes* (1973),⁴ he claims that Marxist theory literally has to grow from a theorist's personal association with the class struggle, this view certainly applies to his own Congo field research – if not to his later experience in the authoritarian state of Togo.

Along with what he calls bourgeois ideology, and the 'reactionary' ideologies of African marabouts, griots,⁵ diviner-priests, not to mention Christianity,⁶ Rey admits

¹ Cf. Rey *et al.* 1976, especially the political presentation, pp. 937f.

² Personal communication, 1979.

³ By the late 1960s, his theoretical inclinations were rather towards Sartre, and towards the critique of Lévi-Straussian structuralism (cf. Derrida 1967a) out of which Foucault was to emerge as a major inspiration after Marxism. Rey's political practice however has had a strong Marxist inspiration ever since the Algerian liberation war.

⁴ Rey 1973.

⁵ In West African French, *marabouts* are West African Islamic leaders, usually steeped in magical practices; *griots* are bards, praise-singers to West African traditional elites.

⁶ Rey *et al.* 1976: 12f.

that historical materialism, too, is an ideology, but one with unique characteristics: it alone, he claims, has the power to render the struggle of the oppressed classes victorious, laying bare the true conditions of their oppression.¹ If anthropology is to become a theory of class struggle, this theory not only has to be substantiated by our usual type of intellectual scrutiny and criticism, but also has to be improved by our actual engagement in concrete practical settings side-by-side with the oppressed, and it has to be shown to be effective when put into actual revolutionary practice.

In these respects ideology is a fundamental issue in Rey's work.² Rey is deliberately, passionately, ideological in his anthropological theorising. Yet his approach remains sophisticated. He is well aware that, even if the ultimate test of such theorising may lie in its utility for the class struggle,³ its intellectual critique lies in a Marxist sociology of knowledge. The latter shows us the theorising intellectual as working within 'the objective historical conditions' of his time and class.⁴ Rey goes to considerable length in order to show that historical materialism does not represent some timeless, ultimate truth, but could only emerge under the specific conditions of high capitalism,⁵ in general, and of Engels' and Marx's personal association with the oppressed classes, in particular.⁶

Rey's work was, at the time, of great importance both for its theoretical depth, and as an attempt to solve the problem of the relation between theory and praxis in the social sciences. It is therefore with all due respect, and while affirming my intellectual and political affinity vis-à-vis his work, that I shall now raise a number of critical questions relating to his approach to ideology.

2.3. Fieldwork

There is an obvious, intended parallel between historical-materialist theorists associating with the oppressed and anthropological fieldworkers associating with the peasants and proletarians (known to be oppressed) in Africa. One would assume that anthropological fieldworkers, participating in the conditions that prevail in the periphery of the capitalist world system, are in an ideal position to 'learn from the masses', in other words to pick up, in the field, essential elements towards a theory of peripheral class oppression and class struggle.⁷

¹ Rey 1973: 174f, espec. 176.

² Rey 1971: 11f.

³ Rey *et al.* 1976: 10.

⁴ Marx & Engels 1975-1983; cf. Torrance 1995 as a useful guide for the theory of ideas through this oeuvre.

⁵ Rey 1973: 194.

⁶ Rey 1973: 172f.

⁷ The term 'peripheral class struggle' merely locates such class struggle in the periphery of a worldwide capitalist system: in such relations of production as display both capitalist and antecapitalist characteristics at the same time. Geographically, such a periphery would encompass much of today's Third World, but also metropolitan contexts where Third-World migrants come to work (e.g. industrial centres in Western Europe).

However, is it possible to specify the conditions under which the researcher's association with locals in fieldwork does, or does not, yield insights that could be termed 'correct' in terms of such a theory?

Few fieldworkers happen to be as fortunate as Rey was in the Mossendjo area. For example, in the various settings where I conducted extensive fieldwork over fifteen years before this chapter was first written (rural Tunisia, urban Zambia, rural Zambia, rural Guinea-Bissau), revolutionaries were either absent, or were socially so isolated that close association with them would have jeopardised my more general productive contact with the community.

In rural Tunisia in 1968 there were muted rumours of a violent anti-government moment that however had been effectively crushed a few years before; it had left a few marks in my data in the form of recent premature deaths noted in the extensive genealogies I had collected, but that was all. In *rural* Zambia the Mushala rebellion,¹ fed by secessionist dreams of a reunited Lunda ethnic realm ranging from central Zambia to southern Congo (where the Lunda paramount chief Mwatiyamvo resides), had considerable backing in the royal circles I frequented in Kaoma district in the 1970s, but the whole affair was far too dangerous and explosive to explore as a fieldworker. The only revolutionaries I came face to face with in Kaoma district were SWAPO freedom fighters from Namibia. It was only after they had searched my unmistakable University of Zambia government vehicle, while keeping for interminable minutes the barrel of a loaded gun pressed into the soft flesh between my neck and my lower jaw, finger on the trigger, that I was inclined to believe the local villagers' complaints about the sexual intimidation of local women by these prospective liberators of distant Namibia. My drawing-room revolutionary's mental picture of the guerillero as Mao Zedong's 'fish in the water of the masses'² had been different; and only two weeks previously I had visited the foundress of SWAPO (Ray Alexander) in her Lusaka home. Revolutionaries remained far out of my physical proximity in *urban* Zambia in the 1970s. Here I could freely read, as a University of Zambia lecturer, the secret police's files on reportedly revolutionary churches such as Lenshina's followers³ and the Kimbanguists, but – being terrified and persecuted by the state – the members of these churches kept so much in hiding that I could not approach them directly even if I had dared. Writing extensively on Lenshina and her Lumpa church movement which had ended in civil war, I never interviewed her even once. And in Guinea-Bissau, where for eleven years revolutionaries conducted an exemplary freedom struggle until Independence in 1974, during my fieldwork less than a decade later most revolutionary elan turned out to have given way to a day-to-day struggle for food, security and power.

Least of all does the term intend to imply that such a 'peripheral' class struggle is only 'marginal', 'unimportant'.

¹ Cf. Wele 1987.

² Mao Zedong 1948.

³ Cf. van Binsbergen 1981a.

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Thus in my own familiar fieldwork settings in Africa, local people's consciousness of their oppression (both under antecapitalist relations and under conditions of peripheral capitalism, i.e. cash-crop production and migrant labour under the colonial and post-colonial state) were diffuse, mystified, and took the form of witchcraft accusations, divination rites, prophetic movements, ethnic rivalry, gender conflicts, inter-generational conflicts, etc. A bourgeois anthropologist might be loath to analyse any of these forms as expressions of class conflict; a Marxist-inspired fieldworker would be inclined to analyse all of them in such terms, but in doing so might be accused of jumping to conclusions, since many of these expressions are, on the surface, so totally encapsulated in the local status quo that only by analytical sleight-of-hand could they be said to protest against, negate and counteract, rather than reinforce, a structure of domination.¹ Could we develop a method that would allow us to interpret these expressions '*correctly*', in ways that are both reliable (i.e. other researchers would arrive at the same conclusions), and valid (i.e. we really find what we claim to find)?

If anthropological theorising has to be grounded in our revolutionary association with the oppressed members of the societies we study, does that mean that our theory is less valid if such association does not succeed? How does Rey appreciate, in this connection, the difference between his Mossendjo and Togo fieldwork? The obvious yet evasive answer (hinted by Rey in the discussion that followed the presentation of the first version of this chapter) is that the international nature of capital and of the capitalist mode of production justifies us to join meaningfully the peripheral class struggle even outside the immediate geographical area of our research, for example in the metropolitan centres where we may not be doing fieldwork but where migrants hailing from areas similar to our research area are employed. Anything else would have been impossible in the Togo case, as well as in most other African fieldwork settings.

Perhaps it is true to say that only rarely has the anthropologist a totally unlimited, totally unbiased access to peasants and proletarians and that seldom can she afford to report on them as freely as would be required for an adequate revolutionary theory of their class struggle. The constraints involved exist both in the field and at home, at the researcher's academic base. As Wyatt MacGaffey writes:

'ethnographic reporting involves a kind of collusion between dominant groups'.²

The ethnographer himself or herself is not necessarily a member of any such group, but it would not be unrealistic to see much of ethnographic reporting as a compromise, informed by the secret and unconscious class alliance between North Atlantic senior academicians (who selectively allocate research funds to anthropologists in the field), and traditional and modern political leaders in the Third World, who selectively admit the researchers into their sphere of influence (by

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1981a: 57f.

² MacGaffey 1981: 253.

means of alliances, *inter alia*, with research institutions ruled by senior, largely post-fieldwork researchers), and try to control the flow of information from the local people to the researcher, and from the researcher to the world at large. Anthropologists' field activities and field reports also undergo censure and self-censure to this effect. Especially at the beginning of a career (when personal revolutionary inclinations may be at the highest) can the anthropologist seldom afford to associate closely with local revolutionaries, or worse still from a career point of view, present a field report whose revolutionary overtones run counter to the (normally bourgeois) political outlook of academic supervisors and funding agencies. I shall come back to this when discussing, further in this chapter's argument, the production of anthropology.

If the ultimate test of Marxist anthropology is its utility for the peripheral class struggle, one wonders whether Rey has had his insights in the Mossendjo area actually brought to the test. Did the revolutionaries of Congo-Brazzaville put his book *Colonialisme, Néocolonialisme et Transition au Capitalisme*¹ within reach at their commando posts, as Rey claims they did Marx's work;² and if so, what happened?³ Moreover, in general, should all our fieldwork be 'action research' in order to be acceptable as intellectual practice? (Even if this means that most regimes in present-day Africa would no longer welcome our research, and would not allow us to enter their territories a second time!)

Will our theories remain untested if they deal with situations in which the link with revolutionary struggle is less easily made? It is very unlikely that, for instance, the Nkoya, inhabitants of Kaoma district in western Zambia, will ever put to some revolutionary practice my constructivist materialist analysis of their attempts at ethnic mobilisation, in which I try to show how their perception of the neighbouring Lozi ethnic group as historic arch-enemies has prevented them from perceiving, and countering, the true causes of their oppression: the colonial and post-colonial state, and the capitalist processes of exploitation and class formation facilitated by that state.⁴ But if the Nkoya do not allow themselves to be mobilised by my academic insights, what practical 'real-life' possibilities remain of putting these insights to the test (apart from textual, theoretical criticism)? And, more important for the Nkoya (and they are not atypical of African peasants in general): how could their class struggle be furthered by our analyses and theories if their class consciousness is still at an inchoate and mystified level? What the Nkoya wanted out of my project was not an understanding and remedy of their economic and political predicament, but mainly texts that would show to the world the glory of their chieftainship, and their

¹ Rey 1971.

² Rey 1971: 7.

³ Rey told me (personal communication, 1979) that they were, in fact, eager readers of his *magnum opus* (Rey 1971); but an account of the impact of this theoretical feedback was unavailable when the present chapter was first written.

⁴ Van Binsbergen 1981b, 1985a.

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rightful existence as a distinct people with its own history. In other words, they gave their full co-operation only towards the production of yet another mystification and reification of their situation, and particularly one that was clad in the obsolete trappings of a tributary, kings- and chiefs-centred, mode of production¹ now eroded and encapsulated.

Does it amount to a betrayal of one's revolutionary inspiration if the researcher, in such a situation, goes ahead and actually, as part of his or her research output, produces such texts as requested by the hosts?² I resisted the popular pressure for years, and first produced my distancing analysis debunking Nkoya ethnic consciousness, but I finally obliged by producing, first, a Nkoya-language edition of the main local historical text and, subsequently, my *magnum opus* entitled *Tears of Rain*,³ which – especially after I had arranged for a cheap Zambian edition – in the course of several years I had to present repeatedly, at the instigation of my Nkoya friends, to national and regional government officials in Zambia, thus reminding them of the glorious past, the very strong ethnic consciousness, and (in my person) unexpected intercontinental resources of the Nkoya people. The situation becomes even more complicated once one realises the class component in the hosts' expectations, for a 'naïve' account of an ethnic group's self-perceived past or identity is likely to render academic legitimacy to ideological claims perpetuating antecapitalist modes of production encapsulated by the capitalist mode; but these antecapitalist modes, too, are structures of domination, furthering the interest of a local surviving aristocracy, gerontocracy, priestly class, etc. at the expense of the local peasantry. In principle, one could hope that my Marxist attempt at a demystifying ideological critique of Nkoya ethnicity might persuade young Nkoya to adopt a more straightforward and militant class consciousness; but there are, as yet, no indications to this effect, as several chapters of this book will also indicate.⁴

Here again, such revolutionary lessons as the Nkoya situation may have to offer could only be taken to some other part of the world system and applied there (for instance, Africanist anthropologists supporting the intercontinental migrants' struggle in France, for better immigration status, better living conditions, greater job security, reuniting of the family, etc.), but the tests offered by such practical revolutionary application, if any, would then be difficult to feed back again into our specific analysis of the Nkoya situation.

In short, as anthropologists involved in participatory field research, we may be in a position to 'learn from the masses', but this learning process remains extremely

¹ Since the royal courts in Africa tend to be non-productive in terms of food and specially of personnel, and to reproduce on the basis of tribute exacted from productive communities, such courts have been analysed in Marxist anthropology in terms of a tributary mode of production. For an example concerning the Kahare royal court among the Nkoya of Zambia, see van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a.

² E.g. Sangambo 1979 and numerous other similar locally-generated texts edited by field researchers.

³ Van Binsbergen 1988d, 1992b.

⁴ Chapters 3, 9, 10 and (for the whole of Southern Africa) 14.

problematic; and the theory of the peripheral class struggle we may end up with would be hard to test in the specific field situation from which it derives. At best we could hope to generalise and internationalise it.¹

2.4. The production of anthropology

Having examined how anthropological fieldwork may or may not contribute to the development of a theory of peripheral class struggle, we shall now follow the anthropologist on her return journey home. For it is there, at universities, research institutes and private writing desks, that anthropology is made – more than in the field. In addition to ‘learning from the masses’ in the African periphery, what are the specific requirements for anthropology to become rightly and effectively a theory of the peripheral class struggle?

It does not seem to be enough if one were merely to locate one’s theorising in the mainstream of the historical-materialist *Ideeengeschichte*, as Rey himself does so often in his works. For whatever one’s explicit ideological and intellectual orientation, as an intellectual producer one remains subjected to the largely invisible objective forces of a sociology of knowledge that obtains at a given place and time. The emergence of Marxism itself, as Rey shows, was no historical accident but a more or less systematic result of the ideological and economic orientation of European society under high capitalism. It could not have developed earlier. Similarly, the emergence of nuclear physics, sociology and anthropology were systematic intellectual responses to the developments taking place within the social formation – much in the same way as royal cults, High God cults and healing movements emerged in southern Central Africa at a rhythm dictated by a specific socio-political history, which I chose to interpret as the emergence and decline of successive modes of production.² As regards the emergence of anthropology, its link with the intercontinental expansion of the capitalist mode of production, mediated by the colonial state, is only too obvious, and I shall come back to this point below.

Therefore, if we are to produce, as anthropologists, a theory of the peripheral class struggle, we should not only examine the relations of production to which the peasants and proletarians in the periphery are subjected, – we should also, self-reflexively, analyse the relations of production to which we ourselves, as intellectual producers, are subjected. Such a self-reflexive exercise should be conducted at two levels at least.

On a general level, we ought to realise that all contemporary anthropology, even the Marxist or revolutionary versions, is being produced by intellectual producers whose class position in the world system is based on a dependence (perhaps

¹ Some of the research dilemmas discussed here come out clearly, and have been discussed in a subtle way, in the work of my colleague Robert Buijtenhuijs; cf. Buijtenhuijs 1975, 1980, 1985; for a comprehensive overview and appraisal of Buijtenhuijs’s work, cf. our book Konings *et al.* 2000.

² Van Binsbergen 1981a.

innocent, but certainly unavoidable) from capital. This dependence is mediated by the modern state or by large private funding agencies in collusion with the state. Individuals cannot generate, or sustain, the immense resources (libraries, computers, the publication of learned journals, salaries, research equipment) necessary for academic production today.¹ Nowadays, the vast majority of productive academics are salaried employees, or aspiring to become just that. Their intellectual production is commoditised, sold in an academic market of salaries, honours, opportunities for publication, and institutional power. Their class position would be similar to that of industrial proletarians were it not for the theoretical difficulties involved in assessing the surplus value produced and – presumably – exploited in academic work. At any rate, today's intellectual production in the West is realised in a context that is wholly capitalist, and the patterns of remuneration, expenditure, consumption and career planning of intellectual producers corroborate this. Now, it would be sociologically impossible for this capitalist context of our intellectual production *not* to determine the nature and contents of our intellectual products. This determination may not be total. That it allows for a certain leeway is clear from the fact that the great revolutionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often came from bourgeois backgrounds. One could well imagine a situation where the very contradictions inherent in today's late capitalism would allow for (or rather, would be reflected in) some limited degree of anti-capitalist intellectual production within an overall capitalist context. But these are likely to be exceptions, the more so since radical intellectuals themselves have been largely unaware of the bourgeois conditions within which their revolutionary intellectual production is set. In whatever dialectical or transformed way, our intellectual products (including our theories of class struggle) cannot fail to reflect largely the capitalist mode of production within which they are generated. Nor does this capitalist encapsulation of intellectual production in the North Atlantic region seem to be a constant: there are massive indications (in the field of state control, the growth of central planning and formal procedures for the organisation, evaluation and funding of scholarly production, the growth of national and international scholarly and governmental bodies to control these activities, the introduction of high technology equipment, etc.) to show that such encapsulation has dramatically increased in the 1970s and 1980s at the expense of academic freedom.² More than ever a revolutionary intellectual practice is to be realised in the hidden folds of capitalist domination over academic production.

¹ Almost a quarter of a century after this was first written, the truth of this statement is less obvious than it was then. Today, a personal computer, cheap intercontinental air tickets, an Internet connection, and a regular basic income from social welfare are in principle all the resources one needs in order to produce excellent, state-of-the-art anthropology and other Africanist social research. The institutional monopoly on the means of academic production has been effectively broken down by technological developments still unpredictable around 1980, when computers used by academics were hugely expensive mainframes only to be consulted at places of work and subject to the proper institutional affiliation.

² My Postscript to chapter 4 suggests a subsequent decrease in such encapsulation during the 1990s.

Can anthropology become the theory of peripheral class struggle?

Secondly, within the general field of contemporary intellectual production there is the more specific level of the production of anthropology itself. Here we should take into account such relations of production, and forms of exploitation, as are typical of the craft of anthropology. What are the relations between the anthropological producer, and, for example, his or her unpaid informants, paid research assistants, domestic assistants in the field, wife or husband who takes care of the daily reproduction of anthropological labour power? What is the relation with the home institute and with research directors, advisory boards, etc.? We might look at colleagues and students whose intellectual products are borrowed, sometimes even stolen; or typists and computer personnel whose essential work may be expropriated in a field report published exclusively under the researcher's name. An analysis of anthropological production along these lines has rarely been made.

At this juncture, let us return to our original point of departure, Rey's view of anthropology as the production of a theory of the peripheral class struggle. It now appears that, in addition to 'learning from the masses' about the specific forms of domination and exploitation to which they are subjected, we have two other fields of domination determining our theorising:

- (a) the general capitalist context of all our intellectual production in the North Atlantic region, and
- (b) the specific relations of production prevailing in, or rather constituting, modern anthropology.

Given the virtual absence of sophisticated theory on these crucial points, we may resort to caricatures to bring out what is meant here. Within the general capitalist context of my intellectual production as a more or less senior academician, I can derive considerable income from contributing to the theory of the peripheral class struggle; this income derives from state resources which partly are realised by exploitative relations between the rich and the poor countries – the preconditions for the predicament of the very same poor peasant and proletarians in the periphery. In other words, however well intended my intellectual production may be, it is contaminated from a methodological point of view – not to mention the moral side of the matter. Another caricature but likewise with some truth in it: as an anthropologist I realise my intellectual production partly through a form of brokerage. I may buy my information very cheaply from paid assistants somewhere in the African periphery. Most information in the field, of course, derives not even from paid assistants but from unpaid informants on the basis of the anthropologist adopting or mimicking forms of exchange peculiar to domestic, antecapitalist modes of production, such as putative kinship, friendship, joking relations, neighbourly relations, etc. Here the anthropologist's role in the field as that of a broker is even more pronounced. Anyway, after intellectually processing the information I sell it at the metropole at a price that at least by Third World standards is very attractive: my academic salary.

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These are, I repeat, caricatures, and I would still disagree with an argument like Bleek's¹ which inclines to take them as true images of anthropological relations of production. What vindicates the anthropologist partly, but not entirely, is that at least for the duration of the fieldwork she goes through the locally prescribed motions of sociability (learned at considerable costs of time, language acquisition, frustration, patience, violence to privacy, violence to modes of self-evident behaviour to which the anthropologist had been programmed earlier in life). This ostentatious display of local sociability renders her transactions in the field increasingly acceptable and legitimate by local standards; this does not solve the class contradiction but makes it temporarily invisible. It is not the moral or economic argument I am interested in here. I am not in the least envious of Professor Rey's class position in the world system, which after all is rather like my own. The point I am trying to make has solely to do with the logic of intersecting relations of production. The point is this: if the relations of production that determine our intellectual products as anthropologists (both at a general level, as members of a capitalist society, and at a specific level, as members of a profession) remain unanalysed, subconscious, hidden as part of some false consciousness, then we do not stand the slightest chance of arriving at an adequate and effective theory of the peripheral class struggle, in other words:

- a theory illuminating the very different relations of production to which other people at the other end of the globe are subjected,
- where the emphasis on difference and distance
- should not obscure the fact that both the lives of these far-away peasants and proletarians in Africa, and our own lives as researchers, are lived under overall conditions of a capitalist world system
- from which we, as intellectual producers, benefit more than we are prepared to admit – and infinitely more than our African research participants.

Our so-called liberating theory would continue to carry too much of our own class position, and therefore would remain mystifying, naïve, ineffective, condescending and hypocritical.

These philosophical problems are further exacerbated by the fact that anthropology, as Rey rightly claims, is a form of ideological production. Marxist anthropology may have its roots in mainstream historical materialism, but at the same time it springs, with all anthropology, from North Atlantic imperialism. It is now fairly accepted to look at early anthropology as an ideological expression, among North Atlantic intellectuals, of an imperialism seeking to create conditions (including ideological and intellectual ones) for the worldwide penetration of the capitalist mode of production.² In a way, the early anthropologist was the intellectual agent of the articulation of antecapitalist modes of production and capitalism. This

¹ Cf. Bleek 1979; van Binsbergen 1979b.

² Leclerc 1972; Asad 1973; Copans 1974, 1975.

imperialist heritage is likely to have some continued, if hidden, impact on whatever topic modern anthropology undertakes in those parts of the world where conditions of peripheral capitalism prevail. Considering how long it took anthropology, after its beginnings in the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century CE, to take up the study of incorporation processes, capitalist penetration, etc. (a very small trickle up to the 1960s, such studies only became a major topic in the 1970s), one begins to suspect that anthropology is genetically conditioned to turn a blind eye to the very processes of articulation of modes of production to which it owes its existence. Indulging in a Freudian analogy, one might say that there is here a Primal Scene¹ which anthropology could not, until quite recently, afford to face, for the sake of its own sanity. Since anthropology is primarily a matter of intellectual (i.e. ideological) production, this problematic might have a less devastating effect on anthropological studies of economic and political aspects of articulation – studies that do not concentrate on the ideology of the people studied. But when anthropologists turn to the ideological dimensions of the articulation process and, for instance, begin to study religious or ethnic responses under conditions of capitalist encroachment, then the ideological complexity of this research undertaking is raised to the power 2 – although we would need additional conceptual refinement in order to distinguish between spontaneous, ‘folk’ ideologies on the one hand, and engineered, ‘reflexive’, imported ideologies on the other hand as produced by social scientists.

Is it sufficient to be a Marxist scholar, and to take the struggle of the oppressed to heart, in order to escape from these contradictions? Or does one succumb to them, just as the built-in exploitative aspects of the relations of anthropological production can hardly be escaped, for risk of losing one’s intellectual and material resources as an anthropologist?² Rey is very much aware of the process by which bourgeois science has appropriated historical materialism and has adulterated it.³ To what extent does the Marxist anthropologist escape such embourgeoisement, not only in the form of radical theorising fed back into the class struggle, but also in the form of resistance against such bourgeois incentives as a salary, job security, academic

¹ The Primal Scene, in Freudian psychoanalysis, is the infant’s witnessing the parents’ sexual intercourse, thought to start a train of infantile interpretations and desires potentially conducive to mental disorders later in life (Freud 1932). Another Primal Scene was postulated by Freud (1913) at the origins of human culture: as the sons’ murdering of the tyrannical father monopolising sexual access to women. It is important to realise that from Freud’s point of view, the patient’s account of having witnessed a Primal Scene was often based not on reality but on fantasy; the implication for my argument here being that perhaps those anthropologists who are so very conscious of the unsavoury origins of anthropology in the Age of European Expansion, may also be suffering from fantasies rather than from sound historical knowledge. However, I am – or used to be – one of these anthropologists myself.

² It is important to appreciate the fact that Rey’s point of view cuts across, rather than converges with, the once heated debate on anthropology and nationalism, as usefully summarized in Nash 1975. Rey’s proposals are based not on a political analysis in terms of Third-World nationalism, but on a world-wide class analysis in terms of exploitation.

³ Rey 1973: 178f.

esteem, academic power, etc.?'¹ An important contradiction in this respect seems to be that access to essential resources for the Marxist anthropologist (funds for fieldwork, libraries, computers, etc.) is partly determined by positive integration within the academic world, i.e. *embourgeoisement*.

While, for the time being, we cannot do anything about the general capitalist context of our intellectual production (or may not consider it opportune to do so, for personal reasons of security and comfort), we do have the opportunity and the duty to consider the relations of production prevailing at the specific level of our anthropological profession. Our work should be subjected to a critique based on an analysis of the forms of exploitation and domination implied in the process of anthropological production itself. A first requirement in this respect would be: that the producer of anthropological texts offer her reader full information on the process and organisation of fieldwork and subsequent writing-up; this information, although increasingly standard in mainstream anthropology worldwide, is largely lacking in Rey's work, as in that of other present-day French Marxist anthropologists.²

Finally, it is useful to realise what Rey's redefinition of anthropology means for the survival of anthropology as a distinct discipline. For Rey, anthropology has to become the theory of class struggle under conditions of peripheral capitalism. Are all other possible topics in modern anthropology relevant and strategic in this endeavour (for example as necessary conceptual or methodological stepping-stones, which need not explicitly follow a Marxist idiom – after all, even Meillassoux³ and Rey are building upon bourgeois kinship theory)? And if some are not, should those then be abandoned? Should we become historical materialists *tout court*, or remain Marxist anthropologists – and if the latter, what would be our specific contribution and our specific institutional basis within the organisation of academic life?⁴

¹ Here again the example of Robert Buijtenhuijs may be instructive (cf. Konings *et al.* 2000), all the more so because in the first decade of my Africanist career he was my senior colleague, room mate, co-editor and co-author (at his own generous invitation; cf. van Binsbergen & Buijtenhuijs 1976, 1978), and thus an inspiring role model to me to whom I have owed a great deal. His revolutionary identification with African 'peasant revolts' in Kenya and Chad brought him to shun a potentially shining academic career, to decline promotions and salary raises as well as positions of honour and prestige, intellectual leadership, and power, and to share his salary with left-wing charities. Time will tell whether such an exemplarily noble and pure conception of scholarship outweighs the disadvantages, for the discipline as a whole, of, as in Buijtenhuijs's case, aloofness both vis-à-vis grounded theory, and vis-à-vis intellectual leadership and senior administrative responsibility, all rejected as forms of *embourgeoisement* and as an infringement of personal freedom. The example of Buijtenhuijs does not stand on his own. In the field of (inter-)cultural philosophy, a similar example was set by Lemaire of the University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

² Cf. van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a.

³ Another prominent Marxist anthropologist of the 1970s; cf. Meillassoux 1975.

⁴ The present section of this chapter takes up and develops points cursorily indicated in O'Laughlin (1975: 368f).

2.5. The anthropology of ideology

It has to be admitted that ideology is more a central and explicit concern in Rey's self-perception as an intellectual producer than in his analysis of African societies, however much the latter may be supposed to thrive on their own ideological elements. The student of African ideological systems and processes will find, in Rey's work, little that is of immediate relevance to his or her specific theoretical interests, in so far as he, surprisingly,¹ does not seem to have an elaborate theory of the specific ideology of the peoples he studies. This does not exclude that underlying Rey's analysis of kinship in some Congolese societies one can detect a summary theory of kinship as an ideology, which is both basically sound and capable of confronting bourgeois kinship theory, as propounded by such anthropologists as Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Lévi-Strauss and Leach.² However, ideology is relegated, by Rey, to the third place of importance in the structural blueprint of 'lineage societies', after circulation and after politics.³ The importance of these other two principles is well argued, but the unimportance of ideology is not, and the relevant passage appears to be too sketchy. Any non-Marxist specialist in African symbolic systems would likewise be critical of Rey's all too brief account of Congolese sorcery notions as a perfect, if inverted, mirror image of real relations between Ego, father and mother's brother.⁴ What seems to be lacking is an explicit method in the light of which the reader can be persuaded that the ethnographic evidence is both sufficiently rich and properly analysed. Rey's analysis in terms of relations of compensation and reflection between the ideological domain and the social domain lacks theoretical foundation, and within the whole of contemporary African religious studies would be considered somewhat superficial.⁵ Many more levels of discourse are likely to be involved. These levels of discourse are likely to be situationally intertwined and dialectically opposed to each other; sorcery notions are not likely to be limited to cases involving the father and the mother's brother; a perfect fit is extremely unlikely in the analysis of African (or any other, real-life) symbolic configurations; the symbolic order is likely to be more autonomous vis-à-

¹ Unless one believes in the prophetic and universal of Marx and Engels to cater, with their pioneering work of genius in the mid-nineteenth century CE (when Africanist ethnography and history were non-existent), for any specific social and historical situation that may present itself for analysis.

² Rey 1971: 207f. The bibliography of the present book contains representative references to the work of the authors mentioned. For an extensive Marxist theory of kinship, cf. Raatgever 1988.

³ Rey 1971: 200. 'Lineage society' (*société lignager*) was the favourite term in 1960s-1980s French Marxist anthropology to denote the type of descent-based social organisation claimed by anthropologists to prevail in pre-colonial and colonial Africa; from the perspective of the Manchester school however, the term implies an unjustified reification of descent as an all-encompassing recruitment and ordering principle; cf. Peters 1960, 1967.

⁴ Rey 1971: 202f. For alternative approaches to African sorcery, cf. Fisiy & Geschiere 1996; Geschiere 1996, 1997; van Binsbergen 1981a: ch. 4, 2001b; and references cited in these works.

⁵ Cf. van Binsbergen 1981a.

vis other levels in society than is suggested by Rey's claim of perfect fit, and so one could go one to list the weak spots in his approach on these points.¹

However, this is a matter of lack of specialised attention on Rey's part, rather than of theoretical lack of potential. That his approach, situated as it is in the mainstream of historical materialism, has all the potential of arriving at a fascinating understanding of ideological processes, is clear for instance from his pages on the European *Bauernkrieg*.² I have elsewhere shown at great length that it is possible to develop an approach to African ideological transformations on the basis of Rey's central idea, that of the articulation of modes of production.³ Here the importance of religious ideological forms should be stressed, not only those of the world religions of Islam and Christianity, but also, and perhaps primarily, such transformations of indigenous religious forms as have emerged under conditions of capitalist encroachment and which, as idioms of healing and prophetism in Africa's independent churches and (other) ecstatic cults, constitute dominant forms of popular religion throughout Africa today.

An important question with regard to these ideological forms is: to what extent do they serve as expressions of divisiveness or mobilisation in a context where the state aims at increasing control of the reproduction of the dominance of the capitalist mode of production? This is a most pertinent question because in the contemporary world (the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries CE) the process of globalisation means essentially that in more and more parts of the world, the state is more and more subservient to, or helpless vis-à-vis, an increasingly powerful capitalist mode of production, now ideologically advocated under such slogans as 'the market', 'freedom', 'democracy', 'good governance', and 'human rights'.

An even more crucial question would seem to be: to what extent could these mystifying ideologies be supplanted by historical materialism in the minds of African people, thus vindicating Rey's central project? While we can forgive Rey for not adequately analysing the ideological dimensions of antecapitalist modes of production in Africa, it becomes rather more difficult to understand why he does not describe in detail, let alone analyse theoretically, the ideological transformations in Africa during and after the colonial period. For it is here that one would have expected⁴ some form of revolutionary class consciousness to emerge among African people. As an anthropologist trying to enhance and enlighten with his theoretical work such forms of local consciousness, Rey ought to have been deeply interested in these ideological developments.

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1981a: 56-60, 77-88; Werbner 1977b: Introduction.

² Rey 1973: 196-203.

³ Van Binsbergen 1981a.

⁴ But, as Buijtenhuijs' work indicates, largely in vain; cf. Buijtenhuijs 1971, 1973, 1975, 1978, 1987a, 1987b, 1993, 1998; cf. Konings *et al.* 2000.

Can anthropology become the theory of peripheral class struggle?

Could the adoption of historical materialism as a dominant ideology in Africa really ever mean the end¹ of the exploitation to which the African peasants and urban poor are subjected? The answer would appear to be negative; one need only think of the Ethiopian experience under Mengistu after the overthrow of imperial rule. On the surface such a negative answer would render the whole of Rey's approach meaningless. A different form of liberating ideology seems to be needed, and we should have far greater insight in the conditions under which such an ideology is being produced, transmitted, implemented, and adulterated or vindicated in the hands of the peasants, proletarians, leaders and politicians. In a more optimistic vein one would, however, take this as an invitation to continue our intellectual work at the point where Rey has left it: to develop, not only a scientifically based ideology for the peripheral class struggle, but also, and primarily, a reflexive and up-to-date Marxist anthropology of ideology. In the process, our anthropology may develop into a more powerful tool, capable of self-analysis, increasingly prepared, hopefully, to throw off the incentives of embourgeoisement within the overall capitalist society – and thus being the true partisan of the distant people to whom we have pledged both our minds and our hearts.

¹ Rey 1973: 176.

Chapter 3 (1984)

‘The Shadow You Shall Not Step Upon’

A Western researcher at the Nkoya girls’ puberty rite, western central Zambia

To my daughter Nezmia

3.1. The Nkoya girl’s puberty rite: Introductory evocation

Not until the wee hours of the morning does the dancing die down. The special festive xylophones (as large as a Dutch dining-room table for eight) begin to take longer pauses. The crowd, which has up to that point been dancing, singing and chanting around the musicians, is thinning. The guests of honour (old men in shabby clothes, some fattish men in their forties in jeans and embroidered multicoloured shirts, and a few other men dressed in that symbol of urban success: a striped three-piece suit) have been accommodated in houses not far from the dancing place. Some very young girls, who have not yet been initiated themselves, are still dancing in small groups at the xylophones, the eyes turned up in ecstasy and sometimes shut; but their teenage boyfriends have taken the place of the professional musicians and the music is no longer great. Yet every now and then spectacular musical battles develop between these amateur musicians at the various xylophones, in which they profile themselves and challenge each other, through the choice of their melodies and their partially extemporised wanton lyrics, as representatives of different clans, valleys, ethnic subgroups. Occasionally the fun-making threatens to evolve into an actual fight. But the tendency towards such active expressiveness diminishes strongly after three or four o’clock in the morning. Scores of people of all ages are sitting and lying around the men’s fire and the women’s fire. Those awake are still passing around the ‘seven-days’ home-brewed beer as provided by the family of the girl to be initiated; while those half drunk and asleep are treated with more consideration than earlier in the night.

The ten or twenty women who had come to sell a pail of their own home-brewed beer have long sold their merchandise. After having stored their valuable empty plastic or zinc container at an address nearby, these women have mingled with the

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guests, joined in with the dancing and singing, and have finally also ended up at the women's fire.

In the atmosphere of sexual implications with which conversations, jokes and lyrics were saturated earlier that night, several have found a partner for the night, and have (after some arrangements with a resident of their acquaintance) retired together somewhere to a nearby house; this is a town and one has to do without the bushes that in villages are always within walking distance. The muted conversations around the fire now mainly concern national and regional politics, tension within kin groups, the cost of living, but now and then one does indeed give thought to the physical and domestic qualities of the one teenage girl who at this festival, before hundreds of people, is to be promoted to womanhood.

She lies in a house near the dancing place, and not, as she would in the village, on a bed especially constructed for her in the open air. But otherwise the rules are the same: she may not utter a sound, may not move, and may certainly not leave her place; even though she has pain from the big white trade bead that she holds clutched in her vagina, made very dry by means of obnoxious herbs; even if she is afraid and thinks she is suffocating under the loads of coarse horse blankets that cover her face and naked body; no matter how badly she has to urinate because of the beer that, against all rules, her mentrix has given her at the beginning of the evening. In between her spells of choked crying she listens to the diminishing sound of revelry. She is especially tuned to the sound of rain. For this is the celebration through which she shall finally become a woman, after months of seclusion in which the only manner she could set a step out of doors was in a stooping position and covered by a blanket; after months of intimidating and painful sexual and social teachings on the part of her mentrix and other elderly women in the evenings. If rain falls tonight, it means infertility, no sons that will protect her in future when she will be old and ugly, no fancy wraps in gaudy colours to tie around the waist, no jewellery, perhaps even no food.¹

The blood spirit Kanga that at her first menstruation, many months ago, had given evidence of possessing her body, will be permanently exorcised within a few hours by the public celebration of her coming-out. No longer will the girl dwell in the dangerous intermediate zone in which the powers that manifest themselves through her menstruation blood are still untamed, and cause damage to all vital processes in the community around her. She is familiar with the sight of open, suppurating wounds, tuberculosis, wilting leaves of maize and cassava in the fields,

¹ 'Rain', *Mvula*, the demiurge to mediate between heaven and earth, is more or less equivalent to the leopard (in Nkoya: *ka-mpulu*, which at least a popular etymology links to *Mvula*; the leopard's spots are equivalent to raindrops, although on an other level it is the *kings* – who used to be primarily or exclusively female – who constitute the 'Tears of Rain', hence the title of van Binsbergen 1992b). The spirit Kanga, and redness, belong to the same symbolic domain of the life force which is mainly embodied in women and which is therefore, from a nowadays dominant male perspective, considered as an anti-social, and subaltern state. The girl's initiation will elevate her to the exalted, leonine state of full womanhood, associated with sunshine and whiteness, not rain. Cf. van Binsbergen 1992b and forthcoming (e).

and knows that these are the evil effects of Kanga when still in a state in which the community cannot control this spirit's power: not only as menstruation blood, but also as the fruits of miscarriages, and through children that were 'set up blindly' – conceived without the mother having menstruated since her last pregnancy and delivery. The girl shivers at the thought of being the bearer of this force. But within a few hours her coming-out as a woman will (except for short periods of menstruation and childbirth) free her from this horrid accessory. She will not have to hide herself under a blanket any more; albeit that from now on she is to keep her thighs covered with a wrap when in public. She will no longer be *kankanga*, a novice, a 'trainee-woman' possessed by Kanga, but *mbereki*, a 'woman', a 'giver of birth', member of a solidary group of women, well informed about social and physical details of her roles as wife, daughter-in-law, mother and mistress, and well aware of the rights and duties that derive from them.

Taken by stage fright she traces in her mind the dancing movements that have been beaten into her over the past months. She will have to perform them solo before hundreds of men and women, later, after sunrise. But she will be beautiful. Her mentrix has already shown her the stack of cloth wraps with which she will give her hips and buttocks the volume of a matron;¹ the bright headscarves and the bead necklaces that her favourite sister has put at her disposal; the strings of beer-bottle tops that she will wear over her cloth wraps and which will jingle with every dancing movement, like the bells in the White Father's church; the rattles made of the ball-shaped *rushaka* fruit² that will accompany the light metal sound with the pointed shuffle of the numerous small seeds inside the hollow spherical fruits with their wooden peel; her uncle's trilby hat that she will wear on her head scarf and in whose sunken top the spectators will put their coins as a tribute to her mentrix who has guided her up to this point. And finally the long string of white beads that was once worn by her grandmother at the latter's coming-out ceremony – beads which were once traded for eagerly and brutally, in slaves (not infrequently young men sold by their mother's brother), cooking pots, hoes, guns and tobacco, and that will now be draped across her chest, over her shoulders and under her arms, accentuating her uncovered young breasts in all their shy glory.

Through the thin pole-and-dagga walls of her uncle's townhouse she hears the music diminish; now and then she recognises the voices of her younger girlfriends,

¹ On a less conscious level one might interpret this accentuating of the buttocks as an imitation of Khoi-San *steatopygia* — probably a memory, enshrined in ritual, of the Nkoya's predecessors (and probably, partly ancestors) as inhabitants of western central Zambia; cf. van Binsbergen 1992b. See below on enlargement of the labia.

² Nkoya believe that it is from this fruit, under its Nkoya name, that the name of Lusaka derives: that of a headman in Central Zambia who, in his turn, around the turn of the twentieth century gave his name to an early railway siding where, in the 1930s, Northern Rhodesia's new capital was built. As from the second half of the nineteenth century, various pockets of Nkoya hunting groups have existed in what is now the Lusaka area, and the interpretation is very plausible. At 400 km away from their rural home, Nkoya urban migrants in Lusaka in the 1970s referred to their putative kinsmen in the Lusaka rural area for assistance (drums, firewood) whenever they staged life-crisis rituals or healing rituals in town.

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who may still dance carefree and sing to the music, and who are calling out to each other excitedly. Her over-full bladder causes a dull pain about to eclipse all other sensations, but she must persist.

In the corner of the room a much younger girl is peacefully asleep on a reed mat. As a second, almost as a bridesmaid, she will dance along with the *kankanga* the next morning, just as she has not moved from her side during the preceding months of training. But she still has a real child's body, is not yet menstruating, and it will be years until she herself will be at the centre of a coming-out ceremony.

At the break of day the mentrix and other women enter the bedroom and pull the blankets off the novice. One assesses if she is still dry, and if she has been able to hold the bead. She is praised for her endurance. Her naked body is rubbed with castor oil. Her crown, temples and breasts are sprinkled with white maize meal; here in town the ceremonial white *mpemba* clay prescribed for such ritual occasions is not available. Around her hips they drape the strings of multicoloured loin beads that for the rest of her life will be hidden under her clothes and demarcate the domain of her nudity, day and night. While the women finish her festive attire, they softly sing the initiation songs that were imprinted on her during these months:

'Listen to what we tell you
on your coming-out ceremony, kankanga.
Turn not your back on your man
Over his shadow you may never step
Avoid the place behind the house
where your father-in-law urinates.¹
Listen to what we tell you
on your coming-out ceremony, kankanga',

and

'The old woman told us²
They made a little girl into a woman
Although she had no breasts yet
The old woman told us

¹ Conceptions of social and sacred space are central to any society, and (largely by reference to the four directions) South Central African village society has elaborated a division of the village space into female and male domains, informing public and private uses of space for social contact, storage, safe-keeping, food preparation, personal hygiene and sanitation, sexual activities, veneration of the ancestors, etc.

² In South Central Africa, the songs sung at public musical occasions (puberty rites, marriages, funerals etc.) have an important function as social comment through which social control is exercised. Such songs often originate in a singer's extemporising on specific infringements of norms and obligations by members of the community. Puberty rites should only be initiated when a girl begins to develop breasts and/or has her first menstruation. The elderly lady featuring in the song is therefore using her considerable authority to protest against an infringement of this important norm. While puberty initiation gives a young woman the right to engage in sexual activity and to openly speak about sexuality (both absolute prerogatives of adults), salt (an immensely valued and indispensable commodity) is a common symbol of adult sexuality. Menstruating women, who have to abstain from sexual activity lest they pollute their partner and the community with their menstrual secretion, are not supposed to cook meals: in that condition they are not allowed to handle the salt without which a meal would be considered inedible.

They made a little girl into a woman
But there is no salt for the porridge yet'.

(Incidentally it is a line of the former song that suggested the title for the present chapter.) These and other songs are repeated indefinitely.

The second is also awakened and dressed beautifully, in a manner that only differs in slight details from that of the *kankanga*.

When all is done the mentrix wraps herself in a big blanket. The novice and her second crawl under it. In stooping position, their hands resting on the woman's back, they blindly shuffle behind her onto the dancing place, where dawn has broken and the xylophones and drums have once again been brought to harmony through painstaking tuning.

In the morning light, practically all those present during the night have gathered again on the dancing place. Beside the few who are obstinately sleeping off their beer, the places around the men's fire and the women's fire are now empty. Neighbours and passers-by (in town, the latter usually belong to other ethnic groups than the Nkoya, who constitute only a small minority) stop and stand in the passages between the houses. For, although the coming-out ceremony of the Nkoya is in many ways unique, and although no other Zambian people is as skilful on the xylophone, practically everyone in South Central Africa is, on the basis of his or her own ethnic group's cultural tradition, familiar with the institution of the coming-out ceremony at which a girl is to dance solo in order to be made into a woman. One stops and stands, not because it is an exotic ceremony performed by the rather despised Nkoya minority, but because the coming-out of a girl is regarded as of universal human significance. The members of the family and of the ethnic group, and other spectators, are crowding up to such an extent that the brothers and younger uncles of the *kankanga* have to break off branches from the few scrawny town trees in order to sweep, in an exaggeratedly threatening manner, the onlookers off the dancing place. Thus a square is cleared in which the girl is to dance, but it keeps filling up again with onlookers.

A small group of women is posted near the musicians. The mentrix and the girls hidden under the blanket arrive at the dancing place like a poorly imitated giant beetle. Accompanied by the unexpectedly virtuoso music of xylophones and drums (you would not say the musicians have a hangover), the women sing high-pitched initiation songs. The mentrix pulls away the blanket and the novice rises limp and dizzy, her eyes squinting against the morning light – a butterfly emerging from her chrysalis. But she soon finds her balance and she begins to dance as she has been taught: taking small steps, barely moving from her place, but with the ankle rattles giving the rushing and sharp tickling sound; with slight, subdued shaking movements of her pelvis, causing the thick pack of cloth wraps to sway and the strings of bottle tops to jingle; her arms bent at some distance in front of her breast, her hands sometimes loosely closed to form fists, and then again stretched out with the palms opened and turned up, as if she were receiving a great gift, or as if she were devotedly offering to the gathered community, in a big half-gourd, all the food

that in the course of her life will pass through her hands, being prepared by her for her husband, children, and in-laws. Her eyes are almost closed and her head is inclined forward as if she is attentively listening to the music. Humble and modest, she avoids the eyes that are fixed on her so intensely.

The fierce concentration with which the audience observes her at the beginning of each sequence of music lasts but a few seconds. Then relatives and friends struggle to make their way through the crowd, in order to put money or white beads on the top of her hat. The girl stops her dance after every song that the musicians play and the women's choir sings. She stands still in the same characteristic posture (inclined head, arms bent in front of her, hands in half-open fists) while the mentrix removes the donations from her hat. Her second dances along by her side (but nowhere as beautifully) and also stops at these moments. The young male relatives use the opportunity to clear the dancing square by frighteningly whipping around their branches (but without really hitting anyone); they are so proud of their 'sister'¹ that they insist on maximum dancing space and attention for her. Cheers of encouragement and other comments rise from the group of spectators. Close female relatives are crying openly. Many a woman, having come to the end of her small supply of coins, pulls the beads from her own neck, makes her way through the on-pushing crowd, and deposits them on the girl's hat. Close male relatives are loudly boasting about their 'sister'. Many are deeply moved, both men and women, and obviously have lumps in their throats when shouting or singing.

Before the girl starts her last dance, the square is once again cleared of the on-pushing crowd. At the edge of the square a chair is placed, on which a father of the girl is seated. This may be her actual genitor or one of his many 'brothers' – that is to say one of his brothers, cousins, second cousins, later male partners of the girl's mother, etc. The genitor (whose identity is always known) does not automatically take precedence over the girl's other fathers, it is far from self-evident which of the men present is most eligible to take the seat, and a sharp dispute behind or even in front of the scene often takes place in this phase of the coming-out ceremony.

The girl dances up to the seated father and kneels down. She claps a woman's respectful greeting and, with her head humbly turned away, she offers the father all the money that she has collected so that he may ultimately pass it on to the girl's mentrix. The father can barely hide his emotion. There is a lot at stake. The collection is a measure of the degree to which the community is pleased with this new woman, and with her mentrix. If the breasts of the girl are yet too small, if her dancing movements are not found sufficiently subdued or musical, or if she has to stop after a few songs for lack of repertoire, she will reap little appreciation. There are, however, girls who dance like the Nkoya queens of pre-colonial times, with

¹ Kinship terms among the Nkoya, and in most African societies, are used in a classificatory sense. A person eligible to be called 'sister' (*mukondo*, *yaya*, *mpanda*) is not necessarily a biological sister, but may be a first, second or third cousin, and in fact any socially recognised daughter of any classificatory father or mother; of the latter type of kin again one has dozens instead of just one.

large full breasts that (anointed with castor oil) shine deeply in the gathering morning light; and they work not only through the entire range of familiar Nkoya songs, but also boast quite a repertoire of dancing tunes of the Nkoya's neighbouring peoples in western Zambia. The coming-out ceremony of a girl like that is long reminisced, her mentrix may expect an extremely high fee, and the girl will be considered an ideal wife.

By greeting the father and handing over the collected money, the novice has definitely left her girl's life behind her. She is led away under the blanket one more time, to the yard of a nearby house, where she is seated on a mat on proud and formal display. She receives all kinds of gifts: cloth wraps, beads, head scarves, kitchen utensils, a handkerchief (to clean the penis of her partner after intercourse) and a suitcase that can be locked – for both male and female Nkoya such a suitcase is the only physical private domain from which they can exclude all others.

The second also receives a small gift and is dismissed from her obligations.

For the first time in months the *kankanga* may show her face to men. A blanket still covers her hair, bare shoulders and upper body; but those who address her elder relatives and are willing to donate a small coin, may fold away the blanket and thus inspect a large part of her naked physical beauty, with an eye to assessing her as a possible wife. Traditionally, this is the moment for the girl to enter the marriage market but in fact nowadays most girls have a steady boyfriend by the time they celebrate their coming-out ceremony. The fact remains that the *kankanga* coyly but as matter of course undergoes this inspection by the few men who still show an interest. Most of the guests leave right after the dancing is over; habitually complaining about the quality or quantity of the festival beer, or expressing disappointment in the performance of the *kankanga*. Those who stay on finish the beer. A few male elders (up to this point everything has been in the hands of women) are preparing to finish the girl's puberty training with a stern talk about her duties and obligations as a grown woman. It is impressed upon the mentrix that she will be held responsible if in future the girl fails to fulfil her duties towards her husband, father-in-law and other affines (relatives by marriage).

After this final training session the coming-out ceremony is over, and the girl is prepared to go through life as a grown woman. Within a few years her relatives will arrange a first marriage for her. There will almost certainly be other marriages after that first one. But never again will a celebration be so dramatically centred around her, as was her initiation – except perhaps her funeral, if she reaches a ripe enough age and proves sufficiently fertile for her funeral to be a moment of fulfilment and not just of grief.

3.2. The female puberty rite in western Zambia

Like women throughout South Central and Southern Africa, and in many other parts of the continent,¹ all maturing Nkoya girls have to go through the training period and coming-out ceremony as described above. Women, as well as men, villagers and urban migrants alike, consider this form of initiation (*ku tembwisha kankanga*: ‘to make the *kankanga* come out’) as the most specific and valid aspect that Nkoya culture has to offer. The day when she finishes her training period by coming out is the most beautiful one for every Nkoya woman. In telling her life story it is a calibrating point in time for all other events and occasions. In the months from April to July one can witness a Nkoya coming-out ceremony almost every weekend, either in the rural areas where the Nkoya form the majority (Kaoma district and its surroundings in western central Zambia) or in the towns of Central and Southern Zambia where the Nkoya immigrants form a small minority. Over the decades that I did research amongst the Nkoya people, I visited many of these coming-out ceremonies. While in the beginning I was moved merely by that which was outwardly perceptible, the public aspects of the event, I gradually acquired more insight into its background and meaning. On the one hand, it is the threshold to adulthood; on the other, it is the most comprehensive and compelling expression of the complex of representations, symbols, norms and patterns of behaviour through which, among the Nkoya, the relationships between the sexes are structured and carried over to the next generation.

It is remarkable that there is no male counterpart to the coming-out ceremony. Up to around 1920 the Nkoya did pursue a form of boys’ initiation, a variant of the *Mukanda* cultural complex (of circumcision, secret teachings, masked dances, etc.) that is practiced by many peoples of East Angola, Southern Zaïre, and North-west Zambia.² Today, however, Nkoya boys are no longer circumcised and (except occasional hunting camps in the depths of forest, which last for a few weeks) not exposed to any kind of traditional, formal training. The Nkoya now even make fun of the surrounding peoples that do practise circumcision. The disappearance of the boys’ initiation has further emphasised the meaning of the girls’ initiation as characteristic of Nkoya culture, and as a concentration point of their cultural heritage. Elderly men and women, who in modern times have rather lost their grip on the youngsters, emphasise the fact that (as compared to girls – even though nowadays even the latter have grown somewhat rebellious by traditional norms) it is the boys who are really barbarous, unmanageable and uncivilised: for the boys miss the detailed knowledge of and respect for social and sexual rules that are forcibly

¹ The literature on female puberty rites in Africa is extensive, but scarcely touches on the central issues of the present chapter. I may refer the interested reader to the following publications: Blacking 1969; Chakanza 1998; de Boeck 1992; Hinfelaar 1989; Hoch 1968; Huffman 1984; Jules-Rosette 1979; La Fontaine 1972, 1986; Rasing 1995, 2001; Richards 1945, 1982; Simonsen 2000; Turner 1967a; White 1953; White *et al.* 1958.

² Van Binsbergen 1992b, 1993c.

imprinted upon women during the girl's initiation, but that of course concern both sexes.

3.3. Witnessing the female puberty rite as a North Atlantic anthropologist

Every time I witnessed a coming-out ceremony, I was moved in my innermost being. As the girl danced, the female relatives burst out crying, and also the men showed their enthusiasm and emotion, tears would run down my own cheeks, too. I have written several poems about the coming-out ceremony, and a long story situated in a Nkoya environment of a century and a half ago and centring on this puberty rite. For years I played with the thought of having my own eldest daughter, Dutch as she may be but whose first language was Nkoya, undergo the initiation and coming-out ceremony, when her time came.

But what then makes this rite so beautiful and sacred? In its musical, dramatic, physical and public manner this initiation ceremony is so completely different from the way my North Atlantic urban culture deals with girls coming of age. What does the Nkoya rite have to offer, so that it could time and time again be a highlight in the participant observation of a North Atlantic male researcher?

At my first introduction to the Nkoya coming-out ceremony, in 1972, I did not pose these questions in terms of self-analysis, but tried to control my emotions. I took these to be a confusing by-product of what I held to be the purely scientific, objective pursuit of knowledge. In the meantime I have experienced dozens of coming-out ceremonies, and after the first years I could rely on a certain knowledge of the Nkoya culture, language and social organisation. My interest developed from the detached ethnographic registration of an alien culture, to trying to acquire insight into the political, symbolic and aesthetic implications of the interaction between cultures, social classes and sexes, including my own. My profession as an anthropologist has aimed at purposely bringing about such interaction, as a main context for the production of intercultural knowledge. I have come to doubt more and more the value of the distant, ephemeral and instrumental methods that are considered to constitute the conditions for professional ethnographic fieldwork. Much of my literary work contains the overflow of contents, images and emotions resulting from that approach and impossible to accommodate in an academic context; I have come to realise more and more that one word or gesture easily understood and answered in the field, in interaction with one's hosts, implies knowledge of greater validity and range than most formal social-scientific discourses. The question I raise in this chapter is not a scientific one, and when seeking to answer it, science can only be of indirect assistance. Introspective self-examination, and reconstruction of emotions and experiences of 'informants', hardly fit within the framework of current social sciences, and demand a more personal approach.

In my question, two problem areas intersect. In the first place, the contact between the researcher and an African host community forms the nodal point in a

network of political relations, emotions, and transference of unconscious conflict matter that we do not normally accommodate into our ethnographic reports, but that is nevertheless worth analysing, if only to take a relative view of our scientific findings. Secondly, in the present case, the North–South confrontation of cultures is crossed by the confrontation between men and women – a confrontation that since the revival of feminism is similarly recognised to be informed by power relations, emotions and transference. The researcher is, in this case, both a Westerner visiting Africa, and a man visiting a women’s ceremony.

In an attempt to trace the source of my emotion at the coming-out ceremony, a number of additional explanations should not be overlooked.

By the time the solo dance is performed, in the morning, the receptivity and emotional susceptibility of the spectators, including my own, is heightened by the use of alcohol and the lack of sleep; the joy, excitement and emotion of the scores of onlookers is highly contagious.

Then there is perhaps a certain pin-up effect. A woman breast-feeding her child is a everyday sight in the streets of urban Zambia, and certainly within the greater intimacy of village life; but for the rest of the time women’s breasts are only incidentally shown: at nocturnal healing rituals and at funerals – occasions at which women publicly seek contact with a higher, spiritual order of existence. I always found it shocking to see the upper bodies of little girls at the coming-out ceremony suddenly stripped of their childlike neutrality and presented as ostentatious female nudity, accentuated by the crossed white string of beads separating the breasts and the heavy layers of cloth wraps underneath. Only a few months earlier these girls were still publicly carefree in their underpants, lugging their little brothers and sisters about. Nevertheless the dancing *kankanga* is by no means a provocative sight, not to the African men present (for whom female breasts are hardly erotic) nor to the Western male spectator, who may come from a breast-obsessed culture, but for whom the girl is too young, and her dancing too reticent (her upper body practically motionless) to rouse any other than fatherly, brotherly, or clinical feelings.

And thirdly, the coming-out ceremony is indeed a condensation of the Nkoya group identity: what they consider most essential for their own culture is here visibly performed. The few pot-bellied, socially fairly successful townsmen, who exuberantly indulge in dance, song and drink, who shake the hand-rattles and are crowding up for a turn at the xylophone, by attending the coming-out ceremony noisily compensate for the fact that in everyday urban life they tend to conceal as much as possible their belonging to the despised Nkoya minority. But because of their leadership *malgré eux*, the few Nkoya people who have acquired a respected position in the wider Zambian society, can just as little be spared at a night like this as the average participants: the many teenage girls, still not initiated and too young for the role of *kankanga*, who rock to the music in near-ecstatic trance and could not be kept away from the xylophones; or the adults who are passionately and hardly secretively taking care of their love-affairs in recognition of the fact that the coming-out ceremony is also a fertility cult.

All this contributes to the total effect, but does not seem to reach the core. The most profound explanation for the anthropologist's emotion generated by the puberty rite is perhaps the one based on the universal aspect of so-called *rites de passage*.¹ They are to be found in all cultures. Everywhere they have the dual function of emphasising and safeguarding the normal order of social life, on the one hand, and of offering – on the other hand – to selected individuals the opportunity, against a set high price, of a personal boundary-crossing from one life sphere to another within that order: from foetus to human being, from childhood to adulthood, from the status of an outsider to that of a member, from life to death. These life spheres are demarcated from one another by means of prohibitions, privileges, anxieties. The drama of growing up, the hope, the yearning and the inevitable disappointment connected with it, is universally felt, and thus appears to be as emotional as the spectator's personal projection can possibly make it. Witnessing other people's profound experiences at moments of birth, illness and death during fieldwork, induces a similar recognition of a shared humanity, even though the cultural forms in which *rites of passage* are cast usually differ greatly from those at home. The courage, the tests, the promises, the glory of the Nkoya novice during her solo dance bring up typical adolescent issues that are also widely recognised in North Atlantic society, through pop music, literature and film. The Nkoya women who burst into tears during the solo dance of their young sister the *kankanga*, when questioned explained to me that it makes them think of their own coming-out ceremony, long ago, and of their many beloved agemates who died before they could witness the coming-out of the present *kankanga*. Over and above this aspect, I suspect that they, like myself, are overcome by the infinite grace and tenderness of the moment, through which the *kankanga* for a little while becomes the incarnation of all human potential at self-realisation, beauty and integrity, that for them (for us) has long been lost. Surrounded conspicuously by older female bodies, the *kankanga* is an almost unbearable symbol of transitory perfection that saddens because it is so fleeting, but also gives pride because the unattainable perfection, for one moment, appears to be attainable.

The extent to which I can identify with the *kankanga*'s boundary transgression, is thus closely linked to the extent to which the boundaries between my own culture and that of the *kankanga* dissolve in an awareness of universal recognisability of human themes.

This answer may convince up to a point, but it is not sufficient. For this universal aspect might by definition have yielded an infinite number of condensation points for my emotion: among the Nkoya, in western Europe, anywhere in the world. Why then precisely here and now? Probably because there is an additional autobiographical aspect that projects that universal aspect onto my very specific situation as a researcher confronted with this specific other culture.

¹ Van Gennep 1909; La Fontaine 1986.

But before this personal aspect opens itself to analysis, I want to assess whether perhaps some other universal factor is the decisive one. While the initiation ending in the festive coming-out ceremony of the *kankanga* settles the transition from child to adult, at the same time it expresses an equally sharp distinction that is central to the ceremony and the preceding training, but that is absolutely not transgressed, conquered or neutralised: the one between male and female gender. Undoubtedly, this distinction, so prominent precisely at the coming-out ceremony, contributes to the experience one has as a male anthropologist amongst the audience. And it is here that my emotions, matter of course and universal as long as they concern the mere passage to adulthood, suddenly become problematic. Is it due to identification based on my being a fellow human being, or rather due to an emphasis on my being male and by implication fundamentally different, that I as a man am so moved at this women's celebration? Is then the beauty that I experience a liberating one ('even although I am a man, I may take part in women's affairs') or an oppressive one ('because I am a man, I enjoy this women's affair in which the subordination and potential male appropriation of women is the main theme')? Am I crying for pride over this new woman, human like myself, who after a painful learning process, and with a whole life full of economic, social and emotional uncertainties yet before her, may nevertheless manifest a proud identity as a human being (who happens to be female)? Or am I merely shedding crocodile tears, and is my emotion partially caused by the fact that I, as a man, again see a woman being imprisoned within a web of oppressive rules and representations that make her subservient to male interests – interests with which, across cultural boundaries, I can perhaps identify even more than with the transition to female adulthood that the girl goes through?¹

The question concerning the roots of my emotion at the coming-out ceremony has also to do with the relationship between the researcher, the culture under study and the researcher's own culture, particularly in so far as the structuring of gender relations is concerned. Since the optimistic days of Margaret Mead, Clyde Kluckhohn and other 'humanistic' American anthropologists, anthropology has often claimed to hold up a mirror to North Atlantic society.² Only by showing how comparable socio-cultural phenomena are structured differently elsewhere, would one acquire an explicit awareness of structures, rules, and presumptions of one's own culture. For instance, North American urban middle-class patterns of puberty seem even more tumultuous and conflictive by contrast with the image of the har-

¹ In retrospect, I am surprised that when I first wrote this, I did not hit here on a third perspective which seems the most obvious: not a play on universal, non-gendered recognition of *humanity*, nor on male subjugation of women, but a *gendered* celebration of female reproductive and nurturative powers as superior to male ones, or at least as worthy of celebration in their own right. Cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e). However, the thrust of my argument in section 3.4 is precisely along such lines. This tallies with the idea that female puberty rites have their roots in the Neolithic if not in the Upper Palaeolithic, before the installation of a fully-fledged ideology of male dominance (cf. Gimbutas 1982, 1991; Rasing 2001; van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e)). Long-range historical comparison beyond the second millennium CE was still outside my scope when I first wrote this chapter.

² Kluckhohn 1949; Mead 1942.

monious puberty on Samoa as depicted by Mead. Recently doubt has been cast on the validity of Mead's analysis: according to a contemporary critic, a girl's life on Samoa was not nearly as harmonious as she claimed it to be on the basis of allegedly one-sided material.¹ This suggests that the mirror can work two ways: perhaps the anthropologist only finds what she is looking for; perhaps we merely project, onto the cultures to be researched, our own experiences as shaped by the North Atlantic culture, and mainly report about ourselves under the cloak of writing about distant others. This transference effect is probably inevitable and can perhaps be compensated, but that does not make it less relevant.

What kind of mirror, then, does my description of the Nkoya coming-out ceremony hold up to us? Is it yet another image of female oppression, a variation of the widespread patriarchal syndrome, even more deceptive because it leads to concentrated expressions of great beauty and drama? In that case, the man delivering the description is either naïve, or a partisan of a male chauvinism surpassing cultural borders. Or does the Nkoya coming-out ceremony indeed contain something that rises above female oppression, and may the man who enthusiastically reports on it flatter himself that his emotions spring from admiration for and solidarity with women? As a man and as a researcher, I feel the profound need to formulate this dilemma, supply the ethnographic material towards such an answer, and attempt to give the answer myself. I am aware of the fact that my argumentation will rouse irritation among certain exponents of the feminist movement: they will possibly detect a suspicious eagerness to please, and explain my positive assessment of gender relations among the Nkoya as expressions of a hidden sexism, all the more dangerous because of its proclaimed good intentions.

The extent to which the Nkoya coming-out ceremony is a ritual of female oppression, can only be traced against the background of gender relationships amongst this people in general. I apologise for the ethnographic detail required in this case; it is a necessary step in the self-investigation on which this essay revolves. I realise moreover that in order to tighten my argument, not only the ethnography, but also the autobiography of the researcher should be dealt with in greater detail than I am prepared to do in this chapter – so that also in this aspect I have no defence against the obvious reproach of projection and distortion on my part.

3.4. The female puberty rite and women's oppression

Looking at Nkoya culture from the viewpoint of women's oppression, one's first impression is probably that such oppression is a dominant feature, but a closer look may largely dispel this view.

In a humiliating training of months, during which the girl is frequently beaten and scolded, while going naked indoors except for a blanket underneath which she

¹ Mead 1928; Freeman 1983; Kloos 1988; Shore 1983.

wears the flimsiest symbolic dress of plant fibres,¹ the girl acquires all knowledge and attitudes that she needs as an adult Nkoya woman. Besides specific sexual functioning, the initiation teachings relate mainly to two other subjects: dancing and daily life (from cooking and agriculture, via all subtleties concerning the dealings with relatives and relations, up to ritual taboos concerning female pollution). Many of these teachings are embedded in aphorisms and songs that condense the material in a rather cryptic, emblematic way. The initiation into the mystical solidarity of all women entails the learning of an esoteric language, in which key words of everyday life are substituted by secret women's words. Furthermore, the emphasis lies on imprinting ideal female behaviour, focusing on unconditional display of respect for elders (regardless of sex) and for men; such display is however not incompatible with a good deal of strategic manipulation of elders and men of her own age in concrete situations.

Daily instruction is given by the mentrix, who is in charge of the girl. The mentrix is a woman between thirty and sixty years old. She is generally known as someone who successfully lives up to and propagates the rules of womanhood. She should not have strong family ties with her pupil; she is expected to inculcate the Nkoya rules and representations in all objectivity, and to underline these forcefully where necessary, without the danger of preferential treatment, and without the risk that what she teaches the girl is not general Nkoya custom, but simply the custom of one family or village.

After practical work in the fields (to which the girl is guided blindly, stooped under a blanket that covers her entire body and face) in the daytime, there follows a somewhat formal training session in most of the evenings. The mentrix is assisted in her task by other adult women. They take on a distant and unfriendly attitude; a hard-headed or impudent pupil gets a beating. Little wonder girls experience their formal training period as an ordeal. Great emphasis is put on the acquisition of an adult female sexual role. The girl is taught to enlarge her vagina to the point when three fingers can go in; she is taught to wiggle and incline her pelvis during the coitus; and acquires knowledge about secret herbs that (unfortunately at the cost of damage to her fertility)² prevent vaginal lubrication – in order to serve the Nkoya ideal: penetration in a bone-dry vagina. Long before her formal training she has

¹ This flimsy *cache-sexe* of plant fibres is another evocation of what, from the point of view of contemporary Nkoya historical awareness, must be considered prehistory — a primordial time when human life was less divorced from nature. Cat's cradles (the formation of figures by the manipulation of string, one of the very few cultural universals and hence also with Palaeolithic resonances) are associated with the training period of the *kankanga*. Interestingly, most food taboos to which the *kankanga* is subjected during the months of her seclusion, relate to species of fish; fishing has been a very old and originally more prominent element of the economy of the well-watered region of western central Zambia. This taboo has resonances in Khoi-San beliefs today, in European prehistoric Goddess-centred cosmology, and in Indus civilisation fish symbolism.

² Comparative library research conducted by the Central Statistical Office, Lusaka, Zambia, in the 1970s revealed that the very low level of fertility obtaining in the so-called matrilineal belt stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean in Africa between roughly latitudes 5° and 15° South, coincides with the cultural practice of inserting obnoxious, alkaloid vegetal material into the vagina, which is taken to cause infertility.

already started to make her labia minora larger than nature provides: from her ninth or tenth year up until her coming-out ceremony, the girl spends hundreds of hours, by herself or in company of girlfriends, indoors or somewhere in an open spot in the woods, stretching these parts of her body until they have reached an extra length of up to seven or eight centimetres.¹

Nkoya women take pride in their sexual skills. As long as their claims are made at the abstract, formal normative level of expressing their own culture in general ideal terms (the level that every anthropologist tries to break through in search of statements that are closer to real life) those skills are solely presented as a contribution to the satisfaction of male desires. Women are taught always to take male sexual advances seriously; if you nevertheless do not wish to oblige, it is better to make up an excuse that leaves the male ego intact: simulating menstruation is the easiest solution, and you can always put a bulging, but unnecessary sanitary towel in your underpants. To sexually refuse your own steady male partner is hardly possible at all. On the other hand, a woman must suppress all manifestations of her own excitement let alone orgasm. Having an orgasm is the right of men, and women who show that they 'feel something' (the euphemism I seek to convey here is the Nkoya, not the English one) stand a chance of getting a beating: the man feels insulted, as if 'it is not he trying to make her pregnant, but the other way around'. Nkoya women believe that they can abstain from sexual delight for a longer period than their men; and such profound pleasure as they occasionally hope to experience, they derive not so much from their husband, but from a lover – and preferably without even him noticing it.

Considering the fact that sexual delight among Nkoya women often remains latent, it is not exclusively the prospect of orgasmic ecstasy that drives them into the arms of their partners. Among women, the threshold to sexual activity is likely to be lowered by their awareness of a steady male partner's sexual rights (as conferred, and confirmed, by kin groups through formal agreements and payments: in other words by marriage) and by the hope for the gifts (clothes, money) that lovers tend to dispense. Moreover, every woman wants to give birth to as many children as possible: the basis for cosmological self-realisation and social respect in the present, and a stake in the future, when the children will be adults and will support and defend her. There are few cultures in the world today where the causal connection between sexual intercourse and pregnancy is not acknowledged, and Nkoya culture is not among these few. As the main incentive for sexual intercourse, however, Nkoya women mention that they, especially during the formal training for *kankanga*, were taught that male sperm is an extraordinary strong medicine, indispensable for the proper functioning of the female body. A man who gives a woman his seed

¹ Could not this custom, which in Bantu-speaking Africa is by no means unique to the Nkoya, again be interpreted as an attempt to imitate another physical feature of the pre-Bantu Khoi-San-speaking inhabitants: their relatively very large labia minora (described in the older literature, with a no longer tolerable choice of words, as the 'Hottentot apron')? Cf. van Binsbergen 1992b.

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provides her with something of unique value, not only in the way of future offspring but also towards her own well-being in the present; and this is the main conscious reason why a Nkoya woman, after intercourse, kneels down before her partner and claps her hands respectfully, genuinely pleased that, of all women, this man has chosen her to manifest his manhood and donate his seed, and has been able to do so. The gesture does not differ from that by which a woman in any other situation thanks a higher ranked man or woman; and only in the clapping rhythm and position of the hands does it differ from formal greetings between men (women clap more monotonously, with their hands more cupped).

This is just one aspect of a whole complex of behaviour by which the symbolic subordination of a woman to her male partner is accentuated. Many other examples could be given. A woman may not go to sleep before her man, nor rise after him. She must not leave the bed without his explicit permission, and for this she has to wake him up. He must sit up in order to allow her to crawl behind him from her appointed spot, the furthest from the outside door, where she can best be protected by the man. If (as one of the initiation songs stipulates) she cannot step on his shadow, it is even more unthinkable that she would step over his very body. A nightly little pee thus becomes quite a formal enterprise. She must prepare and serve his food, then kneel before him and by hand-clapping invite him to come and eat it. But she may not eat with him from one dish. She must heat his bathing water on the fire, and wash him according to strict rules that stipulate which hand she may use when and in which sequence the parts of his body may be washed. She must keep his bodily hair shaven. Above all she is the 'keeper of the house': hidden diseases, defects, shortcomings, weaknesses, fears, passions, distasteful consequences of excessive drinking – all that is wrong with her husband she must intercept without complaining, without speaking about it to a third party, without the outside world even noticing.

Many elements of what we could call the patriarchal syndrome are thus also present in the Nkoya culture: older women who pass on to the younger women, practically without direct intervention on the part of men, their own internalised values and representations of female submissiveness and male superiority; sexual servitude; absence of an explicit right to sexual enjoyment; the belief that the normal physiology of the healthy female body, in menstruation and childbirth, is repulsive and dangerous; male privileges that have no female counterpart, etc.

Nevertheless, when taking a closer look, the picture will prove to be much less negative, and in many ways not more oppressive than the situation of women in western Europe until the middle of the twentieth century.

As far as a woman's acceptance of, pride in, knowledge of, and control over the integrity of her own body is concerned (which is something very different from access to the labour market – although the two viewpoints may merge in particular versions of North Atlantic feminist discourse) we cannot fail to appreciate that many of the recent achievements of the sexual and feminist revolution in the North Atlantic region have been matter of course to Nkoya women for centuries.

Not much different from the western European women under the Victorian ideal, the discouragement of overt manifestations of female sexual gratification is brought about through social and psychological mechanisms, and not by physical mutilation. Clitoridectomy does not occur among the Nkoya, and my information that it does occur elsewhere horrifies them.

The symbolic subordination that exists between man and woman does not appear to be incompatible with a pattern of mutual respect, based on the idea that man and woman belong to two mutually irreducible, yet basically equivalent, cosmological categories. The opposition, and union, of the female and male genders is primarily one of the most important manifestations of the fundamental complementarity that constitutes the world: the complementarity between heaven and earth, dry land and water, day and night, sun and moon, life and death, etc. Every marriage therefore is a *hieros gamos*, a sacred marriage involving and expressing the union of these cosmic opposites; and even every sexual act, every coitus, in or outside wedlock, is in principle sanctified and justified by this cosmology.¹

Gender complementarity, instead of subordination, is most strikingly expressed by what the Nkoya consider the ideal position for sexual intercourse. The missionary position, where the woman is on her back and the man on his belly on top of her, is considered a recent innovation. What is seen as the traditional Nkoya position is free of connotations of female subordination: man and woman are on their sides, locked in embrace and penetration, facing each other, as equals who are well up to each other. Telling is also the term that is used for conjugal partners as well as for steady lovers regardless of marital status: man and woman are *muntu wenji*, 'each other's person'. And the ideal conjugal partner is the *karemba*, the man who, as a teenager, was marked to be the fiancé of a particular girl and, up to some decades ago, in that role played an important part at her coming-out ceremony as the main supplier of firewood for the men's and women's fires. Amongst aged Nkoya people one sometimes still finds *karemba* marriages that were contracted with practically no bride price some forty or fifty years ago (a practically inconceivable term of marriage, in the face of current marital conditions: the average lifespan of a Nkoya marriage is about ten years); and these partners can still delightedly recount the tenderness and the patience with which, over a period of months, the boy gradually ushered in the little girl to consummated sexuality, five or six decades ago.

But these have become exceptions, if they were ever more than that. Nkoya women generally have but little benefit from their husbands when it comes to sexual satisfaction. After their physical training – so shockingly explicit to Europeans – they do however command enough sexual knowledge to find such satisfaction with a lover. The Nkoya are keenly aware of the difference in role behaviour between

¹ The oppositions together making up the Nkoya cosmology are set out in van Binsbergen 1992b. That this cosmology is far from unique to the Nkoya and has a wide distribution inside and outside Africa, is clear from Baumann 1955, and especially from van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e). For other studies of gendered cosmology in the Zambian context, cf. Hinfelaar 1989; Rasing 2001.

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husbands and lovers. Among unwed lovers, there is indeed room for tenderness and excitement. As restricted and bound to rules, almost ritualistic, as physical intercourse is within wedlock, so free is it between unwed lovers – one boasts that there is not a single spot of each other's body, not a single copulating position, that is forbidden; but, as said, preferably even a woman's lover does not notice it when she has an orgasm. However, he may freely eat with her from the same plate.

Nkoya women have vast opportunities to acquire lovers. Relatively mobile, they can (in the context of visiting relatives, particularly in the context of funerals) spend weeks and often months away from the house that they share with their husbands. Their sexual escapades are certainly registered by public opinion, but seldom condemned.

Since the second decade of the twentieth century the formal Nkoya marriage has been sealed by an ever-increasing bride-price. Nevertheless, the rights that the husband acquires are limited. He has the right to the wife's culturally defined activities within the house (in bed and in bath), in his yard (where the kitchen is located) and to a certain degree in his field. She may cultivate on the husband's land, but she may also have land of her own to cultivate. Finally, the husband acquires paternity rights over the children that the wife will bear during the marriage. If the bride price has not yet been fully paid (and this may take years, even decades), a man cannot insist on these rights. The bride price is not seen as purchase money. On the contrary, it is the acknowledgement of the human value of the wife, and as a pledge for the husband's good behaviour. By paying the bride price, the man and his family acknowledge that the woman is a free person, the *opposite* of a slave that could be bought for money. The image of the slave, over whose person the master has absolute command at all times, is brought up in many arguments between married couples and between in-laws. If the man should go too far in his matrimonial claims, or should dramatically fail in fulfilling his matrimonial duties, then he is invariably accused of treating his wife like a slave – and he is reminded of the fact that he has only limited, specific rights, that can easily be undone if his behaviour does not improve.

The leading idea behind the marriage ceremony itself seems to be that the man is made aware of the conditional nature of his rights. Through a fence of brothers-in-law to be, he has to literally fight his way into the room where the bride is with her mentrix. Upon arrival, he must bribe this chaperone to leave the room (after she has given her last sexual instructions to the couple), and once alone with the bride, he has to pay money (formerly beads) before she takes off her clothes, and then again before she allows him to penetrate her. Early the next morning the mentrix returns to the bridal room to ask the couple 'if all went well': whether penetration took place and semen flowed. If these are the criteria for the success or failure of the wedding night, clearly it is the man and not the woman who is being tested here. Admittedly, at the wedding also the sexual skills of the bride are for the first time submitted to the scrutiny of the wider society (as represented by her mentrix), but virginity is by no means a requirement. It is not clear whether in the nineteenth century, bridal

virginity mattered equally little; some sources suggest that it was more of an explicit value then. The payments made on the wedding night are part of an elaborate circuit of ceremonial payments, to which also belong the bride price itself, the donations in cash at the dance of the *kankanga*, and payments made at childbirth. The transfer of money marks the individual crossing of boundaries between social groups (genders, generations, bride-givers versus bride-takers), and defines or redefines the rights of each of these groups and of their individual members. These are ceremonial gifts, and even though they are situated in the domain of intimate relationships and sexuality, they should not be mistaken to be indications of a commodification of that domain. Prostitution (*wuhule*) is a clear concept in Nkoya culture, and has nothing to do with the ceremonial payments in the marital process; the etymology of *wuhule* (from Afrikaans *hoer*, 'whore') identifies prostitution as sexual intercourse in exchange for money in distant places with strangers in a context of labour migration.

If a first marriage is concerned, the girl is rarely free in the choice of her marriage partner; the choice is strongly determined by existing or desirable alliances between villages and between clans, and a possible pre-marital boyfriend has to make way. However, the chance is quite considerable that this first marriage will be dissolved through divorce within a few years. Personal grievances of one of the partners (often the woman) then tend to outweigh village political considerations – though elders will try to keep up a marriage that is politically beneficial to them as long as possible, and only reluctantly will consent to its dissolution.¹

All this contributes to an awareness of balance and relative equality between the sexes, such that the patriarchal syndrome in the attitudes and representations, as found among Nkoya women, is often mitigated on the men's side by a rather considerable loyalty – of which the *karemba* marriage is considered to be the highest expression. When menstruation or childbirth make it impossible for the woman to light a fire and cook (due to the anti-social connotations of menstruation blood), it is normal that the husband relieves her from these tasks – especially in urban situations, where (classificatory) 'sisters' of the wife tend to be unavailable. A heavy taboo forbids the husband to commit adultery when his wife is pregnant or even (according to one particular version of this norm) to fulfil his marital duties towards his other wives, in a polygamous situation. In general men are loyally committed to the well-being of their wives, and besides the medical interventions (collecting medicinal herbs, having diagnostic dreams, officiating in ancestral rituals) that are expected from them as head of the family, they often spend enormous sums as sponsors of healing cults in which their wives are active.² A woman's rights to her activities in the economic and kinship domains are usually acknowledged without fuss, even if they entail her long absence and the resulting inconvenience for her husband. It is part of the accepted manners that a wife speaks freely with other men (in the family's own yard but also outside, for instance at parties and funerals, at the

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1977.

² For the differences between these types of cults, cf. van Binsbergen 1981a.

market or in working situations), jokes with them, and touches them in socially accepted parts of their bodies when such is appropriate during the conversation. A husband who would object to this would make himself ridiculous. Much further, bordering on sexual liberties, may go the recognised rights of a woman's male joking partners from the clan with which her own clan is traditionally paired; and the same would apply to her *mufwala* (cross-cousin), whose ideal marriage partner she is after all, even though the actual incidence of cross-cousin marriages is low. The recognition of male needs makes it normal that a woman, in cases of long periods of absence, looks for a temporary substitute for both her domestic and her sexual tasks: a 'sister' or a friend, that will not represent a threat to her relationship with her husband. Among the Nkoya the sexual and the domestic domains are obviously much less sharply distinguished than in North Atlantic culture. For both domains the woman can fall back on the normal domestic assistance that women lend each other in cases of menstruation or childbirth.

A Nkoya man is aware that his wife is rather well protected by a complex of rules of law and social standards, and that he can easily be divorced if she is dissatisfied with the treatment she gets from him. If she can come up with an actionable shortcoming or offence on the part of her husband and win a divorce on that basis (mainly: inability to supply her with clothes and housing; or complaints in the sexual sphere: having intercourse with her in her sleep, or suffering from a venereal disease, or from impotence), the husband loses the bride price he paid for her. Moreover, his reputation will have suffered such damage that it will be difficult for him to find a new wife in his immediate social surroundings. The man accepts rather resignedly the fact that his wife in many ways leads her own life. He does insist that she keeps to the public etiquette between man and wife as it was imprinted upon her during her initiation training: the man does know the outlines of these rules, although he misses insight into the details and their symbolic background. The vision of all marriage and sexuality as a cosmologically underlined *hieros gamos* is cherished far more by women than by men. Should the wife commit a serious offence against marital etiquette, then the husband is supposed to discuss this with his in-laws in the first place; they will call the wife and her mentrix to task and will, in case of continued complaints, have no other choice than to dissolve the marriage and return the bride price.

Being informed by a set of explicit, formally taught and sanctioned rules, the daily association between man and wife among the Nkoya can best be described as a rather distant mutual manifestation of respect (*shishemi*) – between people who see each other, not as unique lifelong partners predestined for each other, but rather as more or less coincidentally bound together and representing two fundamental social and cosmological categories: husband and wife. The respect shown to the mutual in-laws is an extension of this attitude. The marital bond is not a continual quest for authenticity, originality and the desire for individual psychological and sexual fulfilment, and it is far less dominated than in the North Atlantic region today by subconscious, eminently personal perceptions and motivations. The possibilities for

negotiation and intimidation on both sides are limited. The woman's viewpoints and norms are firmly set, especially since these are rooted in the initiation training that she shares with all other women. Although the couple are granted their domestic and sexual privacy, the outside world has the right and the duty to test the day-to-day state of affairs within the marriage against these criteria, and effectively does so. Mutual complaints about the spouses' functioning within the marriage may be expressed without reticence – that is as long as the 'domestic secrets' remain untouched. And if redress does not come about, divorce is simple. A high degree of erotic and psychological fulfilment is thus just as exceptional as sinking deeper and deeper, over the years, into a swamp of mutually reinforced transference from unresolved infantile conflicts in the subconscious – as so often marks marriages in North Atlantic society.

Judicial authorities (village moots as well as Local Courts of justice created by the government) contribute to this configuration. Their accommodating attitude towards women is clear from the relative ease with which women are granted a divorce – sometimes (but not always) even against the political interests of the village elders; or in the degree to which women find redress with the court when they feel sexually abused by men. Nkoya women may have to hide their orgasms, but their right to self-determination over their own body is judicially acknowledged. A woman may associate herself with a man, be married to him, sleep next to him; but as long as she has not given her explicit and specific permission for every single coitus, sexual contact with her is considered rape and if she presses charges she will meet much sympathy from the judges – as expressed by judicially enforced compensatory payments and easy conditions for divorce.

The fact that many Nkoya women, in spite of all this, find neither social nor sexual fulfilment in their marriages (nor do men for that matter, but that is another story), is not easily admitted in everyday life, but it is indicated in artistic, mythical and ritual expressions. Many traditional songs (recognisable by their archaic language) sing of murder between married couples. There are numerous rumours about women who, in the forest away from the village, breed a snake with a human head (*jirombo*), a terrible form of sorcery; the snake waylays and kills – on command of his mistress – the villagers whom she hates, but in the first place her husband and his other women if any. The interpretation of actual marital conflict in terms of such sorcery is rare. But what is absolutely common usage among the Nkoya is that every death of a man is followed by an inquest within his kin group, whereby his wife must be cleared of guilt from his death; only after acquittal (which is usually, but not always, the outcome of such inquests) can she be ritually cleansed (traditionally by intercourse with the deceased's brother) and return to her own relatives. In connection with this it is significant that Nkoya women have rejected a change of legislation recently enacted in Zambia, that contrary to customary law would finally enable women to inherit from their husbands. This new law makes Nkoya women uncomfortable, for any suggestion that a woman could materially benefit from the death of her husband must be avoided: from there to an accusation

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of killing the husband for personal gain is considered only a small step. Of course, this state of affairs is in itself sufficient indication of the tensions that attend Nkoya marital relations.

In the hunt for lovers, Nkoya women are obviously each other's rivals. But even so it is matter of course that sisters and women friends freely exchange news about their sexual exploits. In order to enhance their own amorous fortune, they may ask each other for a drop of sperm from their lovers. They also agree to substitute for each other's sexual tasks in their absence.

Especially in the frequent case of several women sharing one husband, they are competitors as far as his sexual and material favours are concerned. The built-in tension that exists in such relationships, again, have a mythical expression: the relationship between co-wives is supposed to be rife with sorcery. Any misfortune happening to a co-wife is likely to trigger a chain reaction of sorcery rumours; divination sessions suggesting sorcery as a cause of misfortune; explicit sorcery accusations; and a dramatic crisis in which personal relations appear a deeply disrupted, after which trust can only be restored by ritual means. However, co-wives are habitually called each other's 'sisters', and in many cases the bond between them is closer and more positive than that between each of them and their husband.

Forms of female solidarity can thus have a focus in shared interests in the same man or men, but they are especially created by the initiation process and the coming-out ceremony. These bring about a strong potential identification between female agemates who were initiated in the same year – they are automatically best friends; also between the novice and her mentrix, who (once her strict role during the training period has found its culmination in the coming-out ceremony) remains her lifelong counsellor and *confidante*. Such mistrust and hate as often exists between younger and older Nkoya women, does not seem to originate during the initiation training, but mainly in daily productive activities, whereby young women have to work hard under the tyrannical directions of an older woman (a senior co-wife or a mother-in-law) who, in the younger women's opinion, is trying to dodge the heavy work herself.

The economic tasks of the Nkoya woman naturally have a great influence on her relationship with men. At a very young age she learns to provide for her own food and that of her children. The Nkoya consider themselves primarily as a people of hunters, and, for a man, agriculture is not a source of great honour. In the past, agriculture was primarily associated with slaves, tribute-paying commoner villages, and women. Nowadays this association is changing as men, more than women, have come to explore the possibilities of cash crop production.¹ Besides the hard labour (the partial clearing of the fields, and burning the fields in preparation of the next

¹ Here as elsewhere in this essay, reference is primarily made to the Nkoya under the chieftainship of Mwene Kahare — the group also known as Mashasha, in the eastern part of Kaoma district, Western Province, Zambia. In the central and western parts of that district, cash crop production and the attending changes in attitudes towards agriculture goes back to the late colonial period (the 1940s-1950s). Among the Mashasha, this change came a few decades later.

agricultural season) the men leave the cultivation of food crops to women. Until very recently this society had no, or hardly any, land shortage. Women who can mobilise the necessary manpower to clear an agricultural plot acquire personal ownership rights to that plot and its harvest. Also crop storage and crop processing towards digestible food is women's work. Women manage the daily cooking-fire (if they are not in a state of reproduction-related impurity) and fetch water. They know their way about in the forests and continuously supplement the diet by gathering wild fruits and roots, especially in the annual famine period around the beginning of the rainy season. All this is a great source of pride and security to them. Meat is a much coveted article, and a man who can supply meat (as a hunter, a butcher, or as earner of a cash income) is the ideal lover. While meat is thus a pre-eminently male contribution, it is only women who are able to produce a complete meal without intervention from the other gender – even though meat relish will then be lacking. This independent dealing with nature is of enormous economic importance, but goes much further. It forms the practical side of a complete world view that informs women's lives and renders their activities and experiences meaningful. The forests, the fields, the river, where (in shallow wells and sandy banks) drinking water is found, are all filled with mythical representations, symbols, prescriptions and prohibitions. The competent dealing with these elements, with food as the result, gives women's work a tranquil self-fulfilment that is fundamental to the identity of Nkoya women. They are at home in their world and never needed to squander their birthright to men for a plate of food. Whatever cultivation and trade of market crops exists is mostly in the hands of men. In western Zambia, markets are a recent phenomenon confined to larger settlements. In most rural settings, Nkoya women are hardly active in market trade. In the villages, the women have no other socially approved ways of making money than beer-brewing, practicing as healer or diviner, and being mentrix to a girl to be initiated. The need for money is, however, limited here. In the towns, where a considerable money income is necessary for survival and little opportunity for agriculture exists, the Nkoya woman becomes actually dependent on a man or men. Here, deprived of a productive basis, and with practically no access to paid jobs in the formal or informal sector, women are liable to economic blackmail on the part of men. Under such modern conditions, the built-in contradiction between symbolic submission and cosmological equality inherent in Nkoya gender relations may easily be tilted in the direction of consistent male domination.

In the rural areas women have greater chances of autonomy. Easy and frequent divorce; a considerable age difference between spouses, and therefore a considerable chance of becoming a widow; the relatively detached attitude of relatives regarding the marital and amorous life of a woman after her first marriage (that was usually arranged by the relatives); the relative economic independence of women in rural areas – all these factors contribute to the fact that Nkoya village women go through a typical career. After her first, arranged, marriage has shipwrecked a woman is usually free in her choice of a new partner, but in the course of years she will

gradually attempt to liberate herself from the burden of obligations as wife and daughter-in-law in general, and, relying on her capacities as a mistress and on the increasing contribution of her grown-up sons, she often succeeds in realising considerable independence. In the last analysis her freedom is threatened more by her fathers and brothers (for she cannot shed her obligations vis-à-vis these blood relatives) than by any actual or potential sexual partners.

In cases of concrete assault on her female identity, the Nkoya woman is conscious of her rights and can expect support from all sides. Realising that she has been taught in all details how to handle a man, a woman tends to take on a certain manipulative, often ironic, attitude towards men. In this respect the secret initiation training is of great support to her. She is aware of the fact that she knows a lot more about men, and can toy with them physically and psychologically much more subtly, than the other way around. To women it is often the men who appear as helpless and ridiculous. To counteract the unmistakable forms of symbolic subordination that uphold the ideal of male superiority, the Nkoya woman is taught a very strong female identity that offers her great security in practically all situations of her adult life. She can reliably fall back on this identity and can publicly appeal to it. Not the men, but the culture (*shihemuwa*, as mediated by elder women) sets the standards to which the woman directs her whole life. Objectively, the subordination may be there, but subjectively it is seldom felt as humiliating – firstly because the symbolism with which it is accompanied, is internalised, and is compensated by a great measure of independence and self-esteem; and secondly because contradictions of Nkoya gender arrangements also accord the woman a cosmological vision of complementary equality. In contrast to the male-centred status structure of many other societies, the Nkoya woman does not derive her status primarily from the power and riches, or the income, of a man with whom she is associated as wife, sister or daughter. Besides she grows up in the awareness that her grandmothers and great-grandmothers, as princesses and queens of the pre-colonial Nkoya states were peers or even superiors of men even in political aspects – and the loss of that political status has, in the course of the past hundred years, to a certain degree, been compensated for by the emergence of healing cults dominated by women, in which much of the old royal cult has been absorbed and transformed.¹

A Nkoya woman does not owe her value to a man, and a man cannot really deprive her of that value. She is not defenceless against men. The female identity that she possesses is so strong that men do not form a direct threat to it. She knows she owns at least half of the world. Hence her ability to reconcile to, and even rejoice in, symbolic forms of subordination, that for Western women (with an identity that was – until recently – much more male-derived, and therefore revocable and liable to destruction by men) would be unbearable.

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1992b.

3.5. The female puberty rite as women's self-realisation

Of all this the coming-out ceremony, the glorious public presentation of one new woman according to the standards of Nkoya culture, is the most complete expression. This is the moment when a woman is permitted to present herself to the community and to confront it, with her recently acquired skills and grace. The coming-out ceremony is the celebration of an individual, who may thus take pride in her own unique value *as a woman*. It is not primarily the celebration of a group or of the community as a whole: the group shares the celebration, creates the conditions for it, ensures its persistence as a society (in such crucial aspects as the succession of generations, and the arrangement of gender relations) via this celebration – but the individual is permitted to be the focus, the centre of attraction. The idea that African societies are just collectivist and nothing more, offering but an underdeveloped individuality to their members, is simply a myth, albeit a myth upheld by many African intellectuals including philosophers (but not by such African philosophers as Hountondji, Gyekye, and Wiredu).¹ Numerous are the instances in Nkoya society when men or women assert their individual aspirations and identities: pick a quarrel, press charges, accuse others of witchcraft, engage personally in anti-social sorcery, break away from an existing village in order to create one of their own, inherit the name of a deceased relative, etc.; and the girl's coming-out ceremony is one of these instances. The fact that in the case of initiation the individual is yet a very young woman, at the beginning of a career in which she will have to prove herself as woman and mother and in which she risks to fail in many aspects, makes the occasion even more moving. Precisely this acknowledgment of the own individual value of the girl and the potential that she carries within her, attenuates to a considerable extent, even renders somewhat irrelevant, the subordinate position she holds as a woman and as a teenager.

In this respect it is of great importance that girls are not initiated group-wise (for example per age group, per clan, or per village), but separately. Only in exceptional cases do two girls of the same village have their coming-out ceremony together. Also the moment of initiation emphasises individuality. It is not determined by any impersonal cycle of years (such as the succession of male age classes in many cultures of West and East Africa, with steady cycles up to several decades), but exclusively by the physical maturing of the girl: every coming-out ceremony takes place in the first dry season (April to July) after the girl in question has begun to menstruate and her breasts have taken on fairly adult shape. The second, herself being before menarche and with a real child's figure, emphasises contrastively the individual bodily development of the *kankanga*.

Anthropology has often dealt with kinship rituals or state rituals in which the social and political order as a whole is supposed to be expressed and glorified. The coming-out dance of the Nkoya girl is however more a ritual of individuality (as

¹ Wiredu & Gyekye 1992; Hountondji 1996.

embodiment of a cosmological category: that of woman) than it is one of community. This applies not only to the coming-out ceremony; within Nkoya culture there are other, comparable ceremonies in which one individual is celebrated in a special way – even if partly as a realisation and culmination of group interests. Thus in healing cults scores of bystanders witness how one patient is brought to ecstatic acceptance of the special bond with a spirit whose presence (as manifested by the disease) is thus publicly acknowledged for the first time; in this case the explicit reference to social groups who determine the non-ritual life is even nearly absent – the cultic group does not coincide with everyday kinship or residential groups.¹ In name-inheritance rituals an even larger audience witnesses how the village elders appoint one member of the village community to be the unique heir of one recently deceased, whose reincarnation thus confirms the integrity of the village; for the village, as a historic entity, possesses and transmits to later generations a limited number of set names and historic noble titles on which its identity depends. Succession to a position as village headman, chief or cult leader are special applications of the pattern that informs the name inheritance ritual. Healing cults are based on the same pattern, and their structure may be summarised as follows:

- (1) diagnosis through music, singing and dance;
- (2) identification of the possessing spirit;
- (3) worship of that spirit;
- (4) initiation into the group of adepts of that spirit.

The coming-out ceremony is also a specific application of this pattern. For the uninitiated *kankanga* is considered to be the carrier of, or to be possessed by, the harmful blood spirit Kanga. Another special case is the glorification of a hunter after he has killed an elephant. Also in this ceremony the focus is on the individual hunter's greatness – albeit that he is also considered the incarnation of past great hunters of the kin group. The most elaborate and important ritual of individuality is the funerary festival where hundreds of people from urban and rural areas gather for ten days in order to make up the balance-sheet of the deceased's human life – also literally, through extemporised mourning songs summarising the biography of the deceased.

In classic anthropology there is the inveterate stereotypical image of the African as one with, and submerged in, his or her social group, as carrier of a status acquired by birth rather than personal effort, and as slavishly subjected to standards and rules that barely foster the development of an explicit individuality. In the light of this image these rituals of individual glorification are unexpected. At the same time they readily invite the personal projections of a member of our Western culture – a culture in which assertion of individuality has been of such central value that one of its central archetypes was to be found in the character of Prometheus: the demiurge

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1981a.

who, to his own destruction, defied the gods, procured fire for the benefit of humans, and thus created the condition for culture.

On second thoughts, more seems to be involved here than a simple parallelism in thought scheme between the celebration of individualism in the Nkoya (Bantu-speaking, i.e. Niger-Congo-speaking) context, and the Prometheus figure in the Greek (Indo-European, ultimately Nostratic speaking) context. Such a celebration accords with what Jung has identified as the archetype of the young male hero (at the same time son and lover of the Mother). Jung's archetypes¹ are often presented as timeless and universal, but in some of his statements they are said to enshrine, not the history of the whole of mankind, but of a particular family, ethnic cluster, nation, language family etc. The above description of the young hero matches precisely the symbolic value of the leopard, *not* in Niger-Congo speaking Africa today, but in an Upper Palaeolithic substrate distributed over much of the Old World.² If this is an acceptable line of argument (its contentious methodological underpinning cannot be detailed here), then what triggers the Western anthropologist's emotions in contemplation of the Nkoya girl's coming-out ceremony also amounts, at least at one possible level of analysis, to the resonances of a historically shared common idiom articulating an existential tension that is intergenerational and inter-gender at the same time. This idiom would then be amazingly widespread yet historically confined and far from a universal component of the human condition. Nearly a century ago already, Frobenius³ implicitly hinted at this, when he saw the widespread and fundamental South Central African puberty rites as one aspect (along with the kingship, the sexual independence of female royalty, etc.) of what he identified as the South Erythraean culture complex, to which he also reckoned Ancient Mesopotamia to belong. Although his crude diffusionism lacked the theoretical, empirical and methodological means to substantiate his views to the satisfaction of modern scholarship, there is something of lasting value in this insight.

3.6. Male anthropologist : female puberty rite = North Atlantic ethnography : African societies

Women's affairs are my affairs too, for I am a son, brother, friend, colleague, student, teacher, lover, husband and father of a woman or of women. While writing this text I am continuously thinking of the women in my life and I catch myself hoping to redeem myself in their eyes.

There is a meaningful parallel between, on the one hand, my relation as a man with these women, and, on the other, my relation as an anthropologist with the culture that I study. As an anthropologist there is the confusing awareness that one originates from a certain culture (compare: woman), has a kin relation with it, and

¹ Jung 1974b, 1987.

² Van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

³ Frobenius 1931.

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(based on a combination of positive and negative experiences with one's own culture) can be fascinated, tempted, cherished, confirmed in one's value, and also rejected, by another culture. On second thoughts, ever since my first period of fieldwork my relation to whatever culture I set out to study has been a form of *scientific eroticism*: the aesthetics of 'the Other' brings about a longing that both strengthens the researcher's own identity, and makes a profoundly painful yet equally gratifying delightful assault on it. The researcher goes back and forth between attitudes and forms of behaviour from which he explicitly takes his distance (a distance best brought out by the typical image of the fieldworker clutching his notebook and pen, and, as an observer, continually rendering account of what is happening around him, and to him) – and, on the other hand, attitudes and forms of behaviour in which he gives up that distance and is absorbed by the initially alien social field that extends before him – speaks, dances, sings, eats, makes offerings and so on, as if he hopes to stay there for the rest of his life. It is something one can cultivate, as I did in my fieldwork in Tunisia (mainly 1968) and particularly in Zambia (from the early 1970s onward); subsequent research, among the Manjaks of Guinea-Bissau (1983), suggest however that, as a researcher, one can also adopt a more professional attitude, by which that longing is kept in check, even dropped.¹ More important in this connection is the fact that here, under the guise of scientific research, an almost ritual relationship with the hosts and their culture is being

¹ At least, this is how it appeared when I wrote this piece, in the mid-1980s, before I had extended my field research to Botswana. Later I realised that during the Manjak fieldwork I made an essential step by submitting wholeheartedly to local therapeutic ritual. It was, incidentally, my first experience of fieldwork where I attained virtually total immersion in the sense of not having my own household, and not using an interpreter or assistant except in the first few weeks. The professional distance in my Manjak fieldwork was only apparent, and I was already preparing for the totally unprofessional transgression of 'becoming a *sangoma*' in Botswana. See Part III. Yet, as that Part III helps to bring out, the libidinisation of relations of North–South knowledge production, however much the ultimate consequence of the classic anthropological conception of fieldwork, hinges on two further contradictions. In the first place, on an almost obscene inability to resolve the contradiction (absolutely commonplace in everyday life) between intimacy and instrumentality. But secondly and more importantly, there is no way in which the objectifying gaze of the fieldworker can be humanised without giving up the stance of hegemonic appropriation, of which eroticisation appears to be merely an aestheticised and individualised variant. Two obvious ways out of this aporia are:

- trading anthropology for intercultural philosophy, where fieldwork does not exist as a professional ideal of knowledge production, or
- participatory research in which the researcher's objectifying gaze is turned into a real communicative intercultural encounter, that leaves the researched a decisive say in defining and controlling the research findings and their publication, and ensures that not, under the pretext of scientific research, a private infantile conflict is being acted out – or at least not more so than in any human interaction.

In both strategies the problem of the researcher's boundary maintenance and boundary crossing takes a fundamentally different form from that presented in the main text here. Effectively this means that the longing which this chapter still presents as an autonomous emotion of eminent validity and value, is exposed as a pathological lack of boundaries, as a falling short in personal and professional hygiene by failure to respect not only the self but also the Other. In this respect the present chapter closes in a dead-end from which it took me over a decade to extricate myself by drastic means, among which 'becoming a *sangoma*' was a decisive step but not the definitive step it appeared to be at first.

enacted: a relationship aiming at both boundary definition and boundary transgression (of self-definition and loss of self) – a relationship that is eminently characteristic of the situation of the participant fieldworker, but that finds its archetypes in widespread human spiritual projects such as eroticism and mysticism.

Anthropology is the intellectual eroticism that exists between our own native culture and the other one that we are studying. In the game that I play as an anthropologist in the field, it is of eminent importance that I incorporate, internalise, that which is other, can imitate it to a certain degree in my bodily stances, behaviour and speech, yet am not absorbed by it. If I am too much afraid of crossing boundaries, nothing will come of my participation and I might just as well have limited myself to the mechanical and blind collection of observational data, without knowledge of language, culture, institutions, collective representations and emotions among the research population; then my fieldwork will not constitute an intercultural encounter. On the other hand, if I were to cross the boundaries definitively and shake off my native culture, then I would lose my role as an anthropologist (whose temporary participation in the stranger culture is in the final analysis only justified by the fact that he is supposed to escape and return home, in order to report back to a scientific subgroup of his own society in terms derived from the latter society and largely meaningless to members of the society under study); should I stay (and the temptation to do so has often been overwhelming), then also that would be the end of my intercultural encounter. I would become like the many other strangers who, in the course of centuries, have been incorporated in African cultures (or whatever other cultures); or, for that matter, have left one African culture for another African or non-African one.

Crucial here is the parallelism between the two situations of boundary definition and boundary transgression: that between cultures, and that between genders. The anthropologist does not (lest he ceases being an anthropologist) become a member of the culture under study, just as a man does not become a member of the group of women by whom, in all kinds of roles and capacities, he is usually surrounded in the course of his entire life. The two situations are not necessarily separate ones. The longing for nearness, for the lifting or even denial of boundaries, that is engendered by one situation, can communicate itself to the other, and either strengthen or dissolve such passion as is generated there.

The eroticism that I am speaking of here, is something very different from sexuality, although it may lead to it. When I, as a 21-year-old, was doing my first fieldwork in Tunisia, it simply did not enter my mind that the longing I had fallen prey to, by which I was torn to pieces (and which I – except at the end – felt mainly as confusion and frustration), was perhaps as much caused by what I had left behind me in Holland (I mainly missed my girlfriend, and the private seclusion of a personal space, a quiet room of my own for reading and writing) as by the new society in which I was finding my way. The thought that I could try to solve my longing through a love affair with a woman of Khumiriya was so taboo that it did not even enter my celibate dreams, as far as I can remember. My girlfriend had stayed behind

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at home, and I was very much in love with her, and deeply impressed by her scientific accomplishments as an experimental physicist. She was to be my first wife, the mother of my eldest daughter, and our relationship was to last for sixteen years. The gender relationships in the Tunisian village (as far as I could get sight of then, through a haze of naïve juvenile purity on my part, imperfect language mastery and dependence on my interpreter) seemed to be so strictly standardised, and the sexuality therein so latent and suppressed,¹ that nothing suggested that I could try to translate the eroticism between cultures which was burning inside me, into the eroticism between persons, and attempt a solution in that way. I did research an aspect of Khumiri (north-west Tunisian) culture in which women played the leading role: the veneration of saints and shrines. In contrast to general stereotypes about anthropological research by men in an Islamic society, women were quantitatively and qualitatively my main informants. With one of these married women, under the kind and trusting eyes of her husband and relatives and in full observance of all the chaste codes of the local culture, such a brotherly understanding came to blossom that it became a matter of course that my wife and I named our daughter, who was born a few years later, after my first intercultural friend of the opposite gender.

That both fields of tension (man–woman; anthropologist–culture) were to be short-circuited was much more to be expected in a culture in South Central Africa, where sexuality is much more open, where all men, barring a few very close kinsmen, are potential lovers for all women, and where all men in the same age group strive to establish fleeting or more permanent brother-in-law bonds with each other via their many ‘sisters’. Here, as in North Africa, women’s topics dominated my fieldwork: healing cults in which women predominated as leaders, followers and patients; girls’ initiation; attitudes toward illness, especially young mothers’ attitudes about the diseases affecting their children; the political role of women in pre-colonial states. In a manner that was unthinkable in the publicly chaste North African culture, the unadorned human body, with full recognition of its several vital functions, was emphatically present in the context of Nkoya culture. That frankness also meant an absence of sexual repression, with the result that many situations and actions which (as an oblique response to present and past sexual repression) would be sexually charged in North Atlantic and North African cultural contexts, would be rather free from sexual connotations among the Nkoya. Men and women would touch in conversation, women would nurse their children, the doctor’s consultations of the native healers would be more or less public; one would retire when nature called but would offhandedly explain where one went and what one was going to do, etc. Here my knowledge of gender relationships could, in the biblical sense,² be derived from

¹ At least, that was my, possibly naïve, impression, also informed by general notions of male control over women, and women’s submissiveness and public aloofness, as part of what I took to be the culture of Islam. In 1970 my friend and colleague Jos van der Klei did fieldwork in a village some twenty kilometres to the south of Sidi Mhammad, and he claimed evidence of high rates of extramarital promiscuity on the part of both men and women; van der Klei 1971.

² Gen. 4: 1, etc.

the very intimacy it referred to. It is therefore that my own report on this subject among the Nkoya is partly obscured under the veil of 'domestic secrets' I myself drew around it. My reticence here is induced by Nkoya rules about intimate relationships, more than by professional codes of Western social researchers (according to which making love to, let alone loving, one's informants would be the most effective way of betraying one's scientific objectivity). At the same time my intercultural knowledge could be enriched because, once acknowledged and accepted in my role as researcher, I was occasionally let in on women's knowledge that they (at least, in my impression) would not dare to share with any man, not even a lover, from their own culture.

I have sketched a positive image of the identity of Nkoya women, and of initiation and the coming-out ceremony as the most important factors of that identity. I hope I have not betrayed my female informants' confidences. This piece was written as a result of attempting, in the course of many years, to cross boundaries – from Western anthropologist to Nkoya villager, kinsman, lover, husband; and of increasingly realising how complex and confusing these attempts at intercultural encounter inevitably had to be, how conducive to loss and destruction of self.

3.7. Boundary transgression and identity formation in ethnography

I think it has become possible now to expose the roots of my emotions about the Nkoya coming-out ceremony, whose investigation has been the line of this chapter's argument. These emotions do not revolve on the celebration of female subordination, and in this respect my enthusiasm for the female puberty rites seems, after all, above suspicion. They are primarily a celebration of boundary transgression and of acquisition of identity, and as such a dramatic and transparent metaphor of what occupies me most as a researcher and as a human being.

Witnessing the glorious boundary crossing of the *kankanga*, from child to woman, in a liberating manner coincides with my own longing for boundary crossing, from foreign researcher to fellow-Nkoya, and from man to woman; just like the *kankanga*'s acquisition of an adult identity is an image of hope for someone who, as a researcher, risks his own identity, and as a lover also longs for loss of identity in the hope of gaining a higher union. In view of the powerful force of eroticism in my North Atlantic culture of origin, and in view of the low levels of repression in Nkoya culture, it stands to reason that the longing which exists between cultures, and of which intercultural knowledge production is an expression, came to focus on an attempt to penetrate into the sexual secrets of another culture, to internalise them. Admittedly, it is not unthinkable (although painstaking introspection tells me otherwise) that under this symbolism of sexual penetration and its projection onto faraway lands lies a typical imperialist and male-sexist aspiration to reduce the Other to an object, to appropriate and to overpower the Other – an additional reason why the boundary crossing had better not succeed after all.

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Nevertheless the *kankanga* helps me, for one single moment, to step across the very shadow that she herself, as has been imprinted upon her, must not step on. As long as her dancing lasts, she seems to be dancing only for me; she sucks up all the longing of my fieldwork and love life, and she allays the impossibilities built into that longing. For eye-to-eye with her (and even if during her coming-out dance she does not and cannot acknowledge my gaze) I am no longer just a Western man, nor does she remain just a Nkoya girl. For an instant, the cosmic complementarity of the Nkoya world view is ours, even though the *hieros gamos* thus hinted at will never be consummated, not between us. The web of imagery and the promise of release and redemption are only of short duration, dramatic, moving, but (once her dance is over and the feasters scatter quickly, much the worse for lack of sleep and abundant use of liquor) the web is instantly torn and we are relentlessly referred back, she to her own primary identities as a woman and as Nkoya, I to my own primary identities as a man and as a Western researcher.

Anthropology is the science of what would happen if you should take the step into the other culture. Intercultural philosophy, as I was to discover long after the *kankanga*'s coming-out dance ceased to be the main focus of my intercultural longing, is the science of what that step would amount to, and why you should not take it.

Reflections on the future of anthropology in Africa

4.1. Introduction¹

Does anthropology have a future in Africa? This is the question which the Edinburgh Centre of African Studies has put before me in the context of the anniversary conference celebrating the twenty-fifth year of their institution.

Divination – and by what other means could this question be answered – has been a significant, persistent topic in the anthropological study of Africa, acquiring new depth by the fascinating work of such researchers as Werbner and Devisch.² As an anthropologist, and coming – matrilaterally, as these cases go in patrilineal societies,³ like the North Atlantic one from which I originate – from a European family background that has a tradition in herbalism, interpretation of dreams and visions, and psychotherapy, I have extensively worked with diviners in various parts of Africa, seeking to understand their trade. I take it this paper's set question is meant to provoke stimulating and contentious statements and to generate discussion. I shall do my best to oblige, in the awareness that dreams about the future are often unmistakable indications of problems and contradictions such as exist in the present or existed in the past. The essence of the diviner's task is not to predict or stipulate an unchangeable future, but to re-attach the distressed client (anthropology? the international community of Africanists? North Atlantic knowledge production on the rest of the world?) to a pattern of symbols and relations; to restore – at least for the duration of the session – meaning and direction to that pattern (often through

¹ The title of this piece was set by the organisers of the 1987 conference for which it was written (details given in provenance section of the Introduction) and therefore represents no choice on my part. No anthropologist could consider such a title without having Lévi-Strauss (1965) in mind, but I am not personally responsible for the suggestion of emulating one of the most seminal pieces of the most famous anthropologist of the twentieth century.

² Cf. de Boeck & Devisch 1994; Devisch 1978, 1985a, 1985b, 1991, 1995b, 1997; Devisch & Vervaeck 1985; Werbner 1973, 1989b. When this was written in 1987, my own preoccupation with divination was still only academic. A few years later I became a Southern African diviner-priest myself, as set out in Part III.

³ Cf. Fortes 1953.

somewhat cheap theatrical means which however are supposed to be vindicated by the formal virtuosity of the diviner's praxeological performance); and to confront the client, on the basis of the sense of illumination that is produced by the session, with a limited number of alternative courses of action, each evaluated in terms of the symbols that have been evoked ...¹

One thing should be clear from the start: much as I am flattered by the organisers' invitation, I consider myself not really the right person to be addressing our leading question, and to officiate in this divinatory session.

For despite my anthropological training I am not so sure that I still qualify as an anthropologist – having done research, published and carried administrative responsibilities in the emphatically multi-disciplinary environment of the Leiden African Studies Centre for more than ten years now,² most of the time as head of political and historical studies. Inevitably, my views on the future of anthropology wherever in the world will be influenced by my personal assessment of both the limitations and the potential of anthropology in the present-day intellectual environment of the North Atlantic region, as manifested in the course of my own career.

Much more important, the time is past that others than Africans were in a position to define and advocate whatever is good or bad for Africa and its future: imposing research priorities, identifying blind spots and issuing exhortations and directions. As intellectuals operating in an international context, our 'dual mandate'(!),³ with regard to the maintenance and development of our discipline, concerns

- (a) our home institutions, and
- (b) international scholarly exchange, through conferences, publications, and institutional facilities for research and writing open to colleagues on a worldwide basis.

Let it be Africans who define the future of scholarship in Africa, and when in doing so they subject their views to the international academic community, then is the proper moment for others, like myself, to comment. There are many African colleagues with whom I feel united in our love both for the people of Africa and for anthropology. I trust that those who do have the mandate to speak on the future of

¹ On these characteristics of the diviner's craft, cf. the work of Devisch and Werbner as cited above, and: van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985b; van Binsbergen 1994d, 1995a, 1996c.

² This was written in 1987.

³ An ironical reference to the title of the book by Lugard (1922), at the time of its appearance an influential text on enlightened colonial policy. Lugard was in principle convinced on the inevitability of African self-government, yet his efforts were more directed at protecting Africans from exploitation than helping them prepare themselves for a return to self-government (cf. Bull 1997). Much of the same could be said of the contemporary North Atlantic anthropology of Africa: seeking to present Africans with a better knowledge, rather than assisting them to produce that knowledge themselves.

African institutions and contributions will raise the present discussion above the plane on which I, as a well-meaning outsider, must operate; and I hope that what little is offered here will give them inspiration and moral support, rather than causing them irritation and distress.

Meanwhile, the leading question, such as put before us by our institutional client from Edinburgh (still in the metaphor of a divination session), in itself needs to be taken apart before an answer can be attempted. What is anthropology? What is it doing in Africa?

4.2. What is anthropology?

Anthropology is not necessarily what anthropologists do, nor are anthropologists to be defined as members of those subsystems of formal organisation known as anthropology departments.

Much like over half a century ago when the discipline was being established, anthropology departments in the North Atlantic region are once again peopled by researchers from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds. But now the movement would appear to be centrifugal rather than centripetal. Those lawyers, engineers, linguists, musicologists and geographers of the past were drawn into the fold in order to make converging contributions to an emerging common cause, anthropology, which they believed to be more meaningful and exciting than their own original professions. At present, however, the development economists, agronomists, sociologists, historians, political scientists, feminist and Marxist activists, educationalists, statisticians, etc. that have come to rub shoulders with the anthropologists are so many signs that the profession (now firmly established in North Atlantic academic structures, and with an ever-increasing impact on the arts, mass culture and the media in that part of the world) has greatly diversified and fragmented in its contents, theoretical orientation, and underlying philosophy and epistemology.

A series of rapidly succeeding new paradigms, each with an active lifespan of hardly a decade, has sought to remedy the main weaknesses or failures of the now classic anthropology of the 1940s and '50s.¹ We still owe a great deal of intellectual inspiration and aesthetic satisfaction to the anthropological classics and their authors. If I sum up subsequent innovations and transformations of anthropology as responses to 'failures' of the classic model, this must be seen in the light of this positive overall assessment.

The points on which the classic model was claimed to be capable of improvement included:

¹ Risking an accusation of myopia, I see the Africanist anthropology of the mid-twentieth century as emblematic for the whole of anthropology, and would reserve the epithet 'classic' specifically for: Evans-Pritchard 1937, 1940, 1948, 1949, 1951a, 1951b, 1956, 1967; Evans-Pritchard & Fortes 1940; Fortes 1945, 1949, 1953; Radcliffe-Brown & Forde 1970.

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- (a) Its failure to situate the anthropological endeavour, as an intellectual movement, within the totality of evolving political, economic, military, cultural and intellectual relations between the North Atlantic region (the cradle of anthropology) and the rest of the world.
- (b) Its failure to produce an anthropology of North Atlantic society, including its peripheral, rural aspects but also its urban life and major ideological orientations.
- (c) Its failure to arrive, with regard to societies outside the North Atlantic region, at meaningful statements above the local and the regional level.
- (d) Its failure to historicise and periodicise such structure as anthropology did attribute to the institutions of societies outside the North Atlantic region – and to take a relative view of such structure in the face of the historicity of micro processes of power and conflict, and of the *agency* of the actors in such processes.
- (e) Its failure to subject such institutions (bureaucracies, towns, peripheral capitalism, etc.) as were imposed upon, or spread to, areas outside the North Atlantic region since the nineteenth century CE, to the same methodological and analytical treatment as was given to pre-existing ('traditional') autochthonous institutions, and to grasp the reality of contemporary societies outside the North Atlantic region as a complex dialectical interplay between neo-traditional elements in the South and North Atlantic elements, each transformed away from their respective initial models.
- (f) Its failure to offer a ready, usable, instrumental grip on societies outside the North Atlantic region – in other words to offer a method and a perspective through which plans for social and economic change could be designed, and legitimated, while observing the constraints of minimal inputs of time, finance and specialist academic conceptualisation that development agencies favour. Below I shall argue, of course, that the latter 'failure' is of a different order to the others, and attempts (throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century CE) to address this 'failure' (that was not a real failure) have resulted, not in a positive transformation of the anthropological discipline, but in its temporary and partial decline, acerbating some of the latter's greatest built-in shortcomings: its subservience to North Atlantic interests and epistemologies.

When, throughout the second part of the twentieth century CE, all these 'failures' were addressed and new paradigms were launched to remedy them, what appeared to be a crisis of the young discipline of anthropology, turned out to be in fact an intensive process of growth in all these (and many more) different directions of innovation and correction. The best that could happen to the innovative paradigms was that they were caught into the orbit of mainstream anthropology, and henceforth came to belong to the standard textbook package. This seems to have happened to the Manchester School heritage¹ (an early, and formidable, response to the

¹ Werbner 1984; Van Teeffelen 1978; both with extensive references.

shortcomings of the classic model, initiated and vigorously led by Max Gluckman), to network theory¹ and to historical anthropology,² and did also happen – though in a much attenuated form – to the paradigm of the articulation of modes of production.³ Other attempts, like the peasants paradigm⁴ of the 1960s and the mobilisation paradigm⁵ of the early 1970s, were less successful from the start, never succeeding to penetrate to the lasting core of the anthropological discipline.

The result is no longer a unified discipline with classic overtones, but a composite of schools and partial paradigms. Because of the massive, and deliberate, contributions from adjacent and auxiliary disciplines such as sociology, history and political economy, the boundaries between them and anthropology have become blurred, particularly in the field of African studies. Yet it is meaningful to speak of anthropology as a distinct subject, in so far as certain elements have remained constant in the discipline since the beginning:

- (a) A set of basic theoretical instruments: the thesis of the biological unity of humanity; the thesis of human cultures as man-made, with an enormous range of choice cross-culturally, with an enormous capacity for change and exchange, and transmitted (from generation to generation and across cultural boundaries) by the learning process of socialisation; a built-in sense of cultural relativism, in terms of which all human cultures are essentially of equal value and worthy of the anthropologist's professional and personal respect.
- (b) On the methodological plane, these basic ideas have stipulated fieldwork as the standard method through which anthropology acquires its principal data: sufficiently prolonged to acquire some limited mastery in local systems of language and symbolism, etiquette and subtle micro-political manoeuvring; and sufficiently personal, exposed and humble to enable the researcher to emulate (within the span of a year or two and with reference to selected aspects of the culture) the complex learning process that people born into that culture normally have to go through in the course of a much longer period, during childhood and youth.
- (c) Largely because of the methodological preference for participant observation, anthropology has continued to lay emphasis on the face-to-face dimension of

¹ Cf. Boissevain 1974; Boissevain & Mitchell 1973; Mitchell 1969; Hannerz 1992a; Long *et al.* 1986.

² Cf. Kroeber 1935, 1963; Boas 1936; Cunnison 1957; Schapera 1962; Lévi-Strauss 1963; Harris 1969; Vansina 1970, 1993; Finley 1987; Godelier 1978; de Certeau 1980; Cohn 1982; Sahlins 1983; Tonkin *et al.* 1989; Kelly & Kaplan 1990; Amselle 1993.

³ Cf. Bloch 1975; Caplan 1982; Gerold-Scheepers & van Binsbergen 1978; Geschiere 1978; Hindess & Hirst 1975; Houtart 1980; Houtart & Lemercinier 1977; Jewsiewicki *c.s.* 1985; Meillassoux 1975; Mudzibganyama 1983; van Binsbergen 1978, 1981a; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985b; Wolpe 1980.

⁴ Cf. Buijtenhuijs 1971; Bundy 1979; Chayanov *et al.* 1966; Cliffe 1987; Geschiere 1984; Hyden 1980, 1983; Migdal 1974; Palmer & Parsons 1977; Pitt-Rivers 1963; Ranger 1978, 1985b; Redfield 1947, 1956; Rey *c.s.* 1976; Saul & Woods 1973; Saul 1974; Wolf 1966.

⁵ Harries-Jones 1975; Sharp 1996; Snow & Benford 1988.

social life, such as enacted in villages and neighbourhoods, urban wards and families, and inside formal organisations. It is on this primary level, within its inevitably restricted horizons of space and time, that anthropology has developed most of its skills of observation, analysis and theory. For the modern anthropologist, the analysis no longer stops short at that level but it now includes such wider social-structural and politico-economic contexts as inform, constrain or determine the level of immediate social interaction. Yet it is a basic position in anthropology that its subjects have a face, that the researcher's face is critically and decisively reflected in their gaze, and that these subjects are best approached for information through sharing their day-to-day life within the confines of the contemporary local setting.

4.3. Class limitations of anthropology within the world-system

The emphasis on cultural relativism makes anthropology an illuminating and critical element in any modern society, potentially threatening to all established ideological and political positions, to all claims of hierarchy and legitimacy, as exist in that society. If we cannot refute the allegation (by such authors as Asad, Leclerc and Copans)¹ that anthropology was nurtured – some say sired – by North Atlantic imperialism, the discipline has long since shown its potential to take apart and expose the ideology even of imperialism, and of the formal organisational structures of domination that served, and still serve, the latter. Anthropology, almost by definition, sides with the peripheral, the subaltern, the non-vocal, that which is excluded from sharing in the political and economic power in the modern world. If anthropology does not actually champion the cause of peripheral groups, their members and institutions (it has been known to do just that, in 'action research' and the anthropology of advocacy),² it does at least document their existence, painstakingly and usually with love.

Producing anthropology is perhaps³ as far as we can go in the development of an intellectual meta-language that allows us to speak, reflexively, objectively and comparatively, about human actions and institutions, including our very own. Admittedly, anthropology's furthest venture may yet not have gone very far. Even anthropology is made by actors, and they have their own specific class positions and interests at, at least, three different levels:

- (a) The micro level of the relations of production by which anthropology itself is being made; is there not some Primal Scene⁴ here – repressed as it were from

¹ Leclerc 1972; Asad 1973; Copans 1974, 1975.

² Cf. Huizer & Mannheim 1979; Wright 1988; Gordon 1992a.

³ This was written in 1987, before the emergence of intercultural philosophy as a distinct sub-discipline. See Postscript at the end of this chapter.

⁴ Concerning this concept, see footnote to chapter 2.

consciousness for the sake of our professional sanity – as regards

- the forms of appropriation and control that constitute the habitual anthropological strategies of information gathering and data processing, working interculturally with informants and interpreters;¹ or
- the processes of research topic selection and intellectual censorship that govern the relations between junior researchers, directors and funding agencies, etc.?

(b) Anthropologists, as members of their society, have tended to be middle-class academic workers, implicitly relying on the modern state for the maintenance of the institutional framework (buildings, libraries, computers, salaries) within which the vast majority of their work is carried out.² How much of the specific rationality of the modern state and its institutions – how much of our class dependence as a professional group – has been incorporated in our anthropology without us realising this or taking critical precautions? Clearly, anthropology could only arise, as a critical and comparative reflection, in a complex industrial society whose ideological tissue had been torn by secularisation, capitalism, and the rise of new classes and political structures, in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries CE. But did anthropology's subsequent professionalisation further increase this critical distance to North Atlantic society and its power structure, or did it amount to a paralysing encapsulation, putting a muzzle on anthropology by bringing it back under the hegemony and control of the state, its institutions and its flow of material resources? Did not anthropology lose its bite once it became enshrined in the financially vulnerable middle-class careers of anthropologists? The current³ pressure to redefine anthropology in terms of development relevance, to which I shall come back below, suggests that these questions have taken on a new relevance today.

(c) When at home and when out doing fieldwork, North Atlantic anthropologists implicitly share in the privileges and the power of the Northern part of the world, as against the South. Anthropologists' professional (and ultimately state-protected) access to intimate aspects of social life outside the North Atlantic region, when reported in the idiom of discourse of the colonial era, did represent a form of intellectual appropriation and humiliation against which Africans in the nationalist era rightly protested and which subsequently found a classic, magnificent critique in Mudimbe's work.⁴ Has anthropology since managed to shed these connotations?

¹ For an early discussion on these topics, cf. Bleek 1979; van Binsbergen 1979b.

² The mass unemployment that hit North Atlantic anthropologists in the 1970s has given rise to a new, extra-institutional, and potentially subversive *Lumpen* type of anthropology, that of the 'independent researcher' — but the latter's impact on the discipline has been minimal.

³ This was written in 1987; see Postscript below.

⁴ Mafeje 1971, 1976; Magubane 1971; Mudimbe 1988, 1991, 1992b, 1994, 1997.

With the exception of the intercontinental class dimension, these class limitations of anthropology are left implicit, if not swept under the carpet, in most discussions of the profession. They are of immense importance, however, when we try to assess the possible place, and the future, of anthropology outside the North Atlantic region. Our leading question (*'Does anthropology have a future in Africa?'*) can only be answered positively to the extent to which we manage to argue the possibility of shedding this threefold class bias inherent in North Atlantic anthropology.

4.4. The partial vindication of anthropology

Who is the anthropologist capable of emulating the legendary Baron von Münchhausen,¹ and raise herself or himself (intuitively, women – who have always contributed to anthropology on a par with men – would seem to stand a better chance, not because of their oftentimes long coiffure but because of the class-like historical implications of inequality inherent to their own gender position) by the hairs out of this swamp? Certainly not I. But there are a number of considerations which yet seem to argue, if inconsistently and inconclusively, in favour of anthropology.

One positive point could be inspired by that genial misinterpreter of early (Australian) anthropology, Emile Durkheim.² The social sciences are based on the insight, most clearly formulated by him, that the social represents a mode of factuality external to, distinct from and not to be reduced to, the individual. But the same insight, if correct, would apply to the social sciences themselves: as a systematic, organised and enduring set of ideas and actions, as an intellectual institution, anthropology inevitably has its roots in the petty class interests of anthropologists, yet may represent something capable of ultimately transcending these interests.

Inevitably, the class implications of anthropological actors have partly determined the contents of modern anthropology. But precisely how? Allegations of a conscious politically mercenary attitude among mainstream anthropologists of the colonial period appear to be rather anachronistic,³ except in some isolated cases, such as the utilisation of anthropological notions in the ideology of South African apartheid (as exposed by Sharp).⁴ This is not to deny that there is a more diffuse way

¹ Bürger 1788.

² Durkheim 1912. Durkheim's major source when writing his book on basic forms of religion was the classic pioneer ethnography of Australian Aboriginal social organisation: Spencer & Gillen 1904. Durkheim's immensely influential theoretical interpretation of Australian socio-ritual organisation in terms of society venerating itself through the medium of arbitrarily chosen symbols has since been criticised by anthropologists making reference to empirical anthropological data concerning Aboriginal societies; e.g. Goldenweiser 1958; Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 165f; Stanner 1965, 1967; van Binsbergen 1968 and forthcoming (c); Worsley 1956.

³ Cf. Asad 1973; Firth *et al.* 1977; Lewis 1973; Prah 1981.

⁴ Sharp 1981.

in which the classic anthropological endeavour has been profoundly reflective of, and subservient to, the North Atlantic hegemonic project.¹ That this orientation has roots in the European Enlightenment, and in the founding father of modern philosophy, Immanuel Kant, has been argued by Eze.²

But however this may be, the various transformations from classic to modern anthropology, as summarised all too briefly above in terms of projects to redress a series of ‘failures’, suggest that over the past few decades an enormous amount of sincere creative energy has been invested in producing an anthropology that at least takes some deliberate critical distance from the class ideologies of anthropologists of the classic era, such as we perceive them now. Someday our successors may perceive similar class-based shortcomings in our own work, and improve upon those. African colleagues, such as Mafeje, Magubane, Okot p’Bitek³ – to mention only a few – have contributed significantly to these transformations. Their work is an indication that at least the intercontinental class biases in anthropology can be made explicit, and can be corrected, without immediately destroying the anthropological discipline as an intellectual institution as a whole; its contents cannot be entirely reduced to North Atlantic intellectual domination, hence its continued critical appeal to academic minds outside that region. These African authors were clamouring for a better anthropology, not for the abolition of anthropology. Their efforts clearly show that anthropology as a mode of thought is not really ‘owned’ by the North.

Nor could it be. Ultimately, the appropriation of academic knowledge by specific class interests is challenged, at least partially, by the fact that there is a limit to the extent to which the main results of academic production, books, can be kept from free and wide circulation. Moreover, no one is born a scholar, so scholarship is reproduced by constant recruitment (through education) from among non-scholars. Despite some well-known cases of auto-reproduction of anthropological positions of privilege from generation to generation,⁴ most contemporary anthropologists were recruited from milieus that had not produced anthropologists before – nor academics in general, for that matter. Particularly in the anthropological discipline, which has internalised so fully the notion that human culture is not acquired by birth but only transmitted through a learning process, the catchment area for recruitment has always tended to be very wide, including members of marginalised groups from the local society (members of religious, ethnic and sexual minorities; women; working-class people) as well as members of societies outside the North Atlantic region.

¹ Cf. Fabian 1983; Pels 1997; Pels & Salemink 1994; Trask 1991.

² Eze 1997b. Since nineteenth- and twentieth-century CE historicism, as a dominant factor in social and sociological thought, owes a greater debt to Hegel than to Kant, also see the critique of Hegel’s anti-African frame of mind by the prominent Hegel scholar Heinz Kimmerle: Kimmerle 1993; also cf. Keita 1974.

³ Mafeje 1971, 1976; Magubane 1971; p’Bitek 1970.

⁴ The practice was somewhat endemic at Leyden University, the Netherlands, in the first half of the twentieth century; e.g. both father and son de Josselin de Jong held the chair of general anthropology, and both father and son Holleman the chair of customary law.

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Perhaps their earlier crossing of (sub-)cultural and social-class boundaries in the course of the process of becoming an anthropologist, has helped colleagues from the Third World – or colleagues from marginalised groups in the North Atlantic region (like myself, who was born in an urban slum), for that matter – to cross similar boundaries again, professionally, in fieldwork, once they had become anthropologists.

Possibly, anthropologists from marginalised Northern backgrounds, and from South backgrounds, may have been less prone to completely entrench themselves in the class implications that yet attach to all anthropology. More importantly, participatory fieldwork, which has continued to form the hallmark of anthropology, puts the researcher in a position that is, both politically and epistemologically, absolutely unique among academic disciplines. As the standard research praxis stipulated by the profession, fieldwork contains the basic philosophical tenets of anthropology: culture is learned; therefore research means learning a culture that is perceived as *learnable much more than as exotic*; and, in the course of prolonged participatory fieldwork, that culture comes ever closer to the researcher, revealing its internal structure, meaning and beauty ever more fully; therefore anthropological research is, among other things, an initially painful but ever more gratifying dependence relation between the humble role of the fieldworker and the dominant role of the informant.

All this means that on the interactional, practical level anthropological fieldwork in itself offers a process of *intercultural encounter* that at least partially resolves and transcends the class implications of anthropology. Of the three levels of class implications that I identified for anthropology, this resolution and transcendence is very clear at the intermediate and the intercontinental level, where distant theorising prevails. It is rather less obvious at the micro level of the relations of anthropological production in fieldwork, about which each anthropologist has interminable private tales to tell, but about which the anthropological profession as a whole has far too little systematic and public knowledge, since the topic is largely avoided in published anthropological discourse.

In fact, the temporary resolution of the class tensions implied in fieldwork is among the basic skills of the anthropologist: if he or she falls short in this intercultural interaction management, the productive field relations (the ones that combine instrumentality with intimacy, trust with social calculation) from which most valuable information is to come, will never be established. The social control that the profession exercises over its members in this connection should not be underestimated: the quality of the fieldwork process is both too subtle and too recognisable, even from the finished ethnographic product, than that too many bad fieldworkers could get away with their failure on this point. At the same time we had better admit that many anthropologists, during a spell of fieldwork or during their periods of absence from the field, have experienced major conflicts with their local research participants precisely when these anthropologists could no longer dissimulate the class contradiction in fieldwork (the contradiction between

informants more or less freely offering information and services, and researchers building, upon these spoils, academic careers that – however uncertain and financially unattractive from the point of view of North Atlantic alternatives in medicine or commerce – from the perspective of most Third World research participants can only appear as unbelievably lucrative).

Despite such tensions it is a common anthropological experience that many informants greatly enjoy the personal exchange at the boundary between cultures in the context of fieldwork. The class implications of anthropology are nowhere more effectively dissimulated, even dispelled, than in the field, by both researcher and informants. Here, a perspective of intercultural communication is gradually agreed upon, in the course of one's fieldwork, in which the anthropologist's work takes on a specific significance also in the eyes of the informants: to put on record fading institutions that are dear to the latter, to express an emerging ethnic identity in such a form (academic discourse in an international language) as carries weight with the powers that be at the national level, etc. Here, the anthropologist is most appreciated by the people if she acts in accordance with their expectations and viewpoints; thus she can interpret their culture to the outside world, but it will be much harder for her to translate the outside world to the local people if such messages from the outside threaten established local perceptions, values, and identity constructs. For fieldwork, a receptive humility is professionally encouraged, and in such a frame of mind the fieldworker may not be able to explode a local stereotype, a deceptive identity construction, a patently wrong reading of regional history – as I experienced when in the course of decades of fieldwork contact with the Nkoya people of western central Zambia, the publications that contained my academic attempts at radical deconstruction of their recent, historically shallow and politically naïve ethnic self-identity were turned, by them, into their very opposite: ethnic propaganda.¹

However, it is not in the field that anthropology is being written. Another basic anthropological skill is that of taking a radical distance from the intimacy of field participation, and to rearrange and transform the field information selectively so as to make the written product acceptable within the formal patterning of academic production, rendering that product conducive to academic goals (degree, career, competition between departments, paradigms and national schools of anthropology, etc.) that are completely irrelevant to the informants and often almost betray the terms of their co-operation in the field. The payoffs the informants had envisaged during fieldwork (the publication of locally accessible histories and ethnographies; and local development projects in the productive, educational and medical domain, to be located in the research area, etc.) become much delayed by-products of the project's main output – if they materialise at all. In pursuance of middle-class security as a professional, the anthropologist tends to sacrifice the intercultural intimacy of his or her fieldwork. So, while the anthropological encounter contains

¹ Van Binsbergen 1984a; revised version included in the present book as chapter 2.

the potential for a partial resolution of the built-in class conflict at the micro level, it fails in the end, in the final product.

Meanwhile, despite the discipline's emphasis on cultural relativism and universalism, both of which imply intercontinental equality, the intercontinental class dimension continues to be reproduced in contemporary anthropology on the organisational side. The production, and reproduction even, of a transformed and critical, post-classic anthropology has been largely monopolised by North Atlantic academic institutions. In the African nationalist era, shortly after African countries gained independence (1960s–1970s), anthropology on African soil often had to be disguised as either sociology or history. This situation has somewhat changed now, and we could cite hundreds of names of African colleagues engaged in the pursuit of anthropology in Africa today. Yet it is not by virtue of some perspectival distortion that anthropology as a field of academic interaction, where power is generated and resources are allocated, still appears to be largely 'owned' by the North. Anthropological training institutions, collections, libraries, research funds, chairs, journals are for the most part situated in, or initiated and controlled from, the North Atlantic region. Our colleagues who are permanently living and working in Africa are almost, by definition, peripheral to the mainstream of the discipline.

4.5. Towards an answer

We are already approaching the end of our divination session. While I have attempted to refine our client's question as put before the oracle, and to show some of its less manifest implications, I have surely not been able to captivate my audience's attention sufficiently to conceal effectively from their perception my own deliberate juggling with the divinatory apparatus, and to put them, praxeologically, in such a susceptible state of consciousness that my next pronouncements will appear to them as eminently true and illuminating. My limited rhetorical skills, and the fact that many of my readers may not be anthropologists, may have something to do with this failure. However, many African diviners manage to carry out their trade across cultural and linguistic boundaries, and to convey, in the course of their sessions, a sense of relevance that initially would not seem possible considering the great difference in cultural background and mother tongue between themselves and their clients; on this point the real divination session is only imperfectly mimicked in my argument.

I have, meanwhile, tried to evoke a set of symbols that may appeal to my audience and that may add heightened meaning to our initial question. For I have depicted anthropology as a *meta-language* (however haunted by ineradicable connotations of inequality) *for the detached appreciation of human action and human institutions*, with a well-developed sense of relativism, equality, understanding and admiration. Such anthropology cannot just be the intellectual possession of North Atlantic academics but may come to be recognised among the positive universal achievements of humankind. It enshrines a substantial part of the

reflection, comparison and criticism that have constituted the proper domain of intellectuals in a changing society whenever and wherever. It makes anthropology a subject worthy of our love and dedication, in Africa as elsewhere. With its built-in emphasis on the local and regional level; with its well-developed methods to approach the people who are voiceless and peripheral, and to arrive at valid statements about their actions and institutions, – with these characteristics anthropology can be expected to play a positive role in some of the most significant social and ideological processes going on in African societies today: the encounter between peasants and urban proletarians, on the one hand, the state and its formal bureaucratic organisations, on the other. And also among the educated elites of Africa – to whom the finished products of anthropology are as available as the international book trade and local Internet access allow (which is not good enough by far) – anthropology offers some of the means to come to terms with their own background and heritage.

So much for the exalted symbolic vision. I have proceeded by indicating the negative elements that yet taint this kind of anthropology: its threefold class implications, which may be temporarily and partially resolved – but only subjectively – and transcended in the concentrated situation of anthropological fieldwork yet form part and parcel of the praxis of anthropology at our North Atlantic institutions of learning, primarily because of the way in which the discipline is organised and in which its resources and power are unevenly distributed across the continents.

Therefore, if anthropology is to realise its potential future in Africa, it has to become truly intercontinental, not just in theory and thought (it has been that from the beginning), but particularly in organisational and opportunity structure: in the location of resources (books, research money, vehicles, computers, Internet access, opportunities for publication), initiatives, power, institutions.

Ever since the majority of African territories gained independence, North Atlantic Africanist anthropologists have sought to protect their own and their students' access to research sites in Africa, trading logistic support, prestigious invitations and appointments for African colleagues, assistance in publishing and occasional teaching at African universities, for that much coveted piece of paper: the research clearance. In doing so we have implicitly perpetuated the intercontinental class dimension of anthropology. At the back of our minds has lingered the assumption that, when all is said and done, the anthropology of African societies is best left in the hands of North Atlantic anthropologists.

So far, our African colleagues, their research institutions and boards have been patient with Northern anthropologists, and have tolerated our continued presence – helping us find our way through the procedures of African government agencies that control research clearances, and occasionally even praising our publications when and if they came out, and when and if they happened to be made available to our African counterparts. In the long run, however, the best way to destroy Africanist anthropology, first in Africa itself, and soon also in the North Atlantic region, is to

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hold on to the North Atlantic initiative and professional power in Africanist research. If the discipline is to make all the positive contributions to African society, and so to the global society, we pretend it could make, then it must attune itself to the political and economic realities of the African continent today and its relations with the rest of the world.

This reality is immensely complex and contradictory, but even so it should be clear that, after decades of North Atlantic cultural and ideological domination largely brought about by institutions other than anthropology, the necessary reconstruction of a viable and dynamic self-image among Africans and African societies has to be primarily undertaken by Africans themselves. Here intellectuals from the North Atlantic region can at best perform such ancillary roles as assigned to us, or requested from us, within the framework of research plans and priorities drawn up by African institutions. In so far as our North Atlantic Africanist research seeks justification in terms of a claimed contribution to contemporary and future African society, the most obvious touchstone for that justification lies in the confrontation with such African research plans. This is not to automatically deny all justification to such anthropological research in Africa as primarily derives from North Atlantic research priorities without much of an African intellectual input. Much research was, and still is, proposed by reference to fine points of anthropological theory as developed at North Atlantic centres of learning. Sometimes such projects do contribute to the theoretical development of the anthropological discipline in general, and should therefore be encouraged. But in the context of obtaining research clearances, such research should not pretend to be primarily contributing to current intellectual responsibilities and priorities within Africa; research permission in this context is an intercontinental, bilateral prestation from the South to the North, and it should be traded off against similar or related services extended from the North to the South.

Turning now to the potential of anthropology to represent peripheral regional and ethnic groups and institutions (such as chieftainship, puberty initiation), whose position and status in contemporary African nation-states may be, somewhat irreverently (and with the same implications of self-imposed global responsibility), compared to those of endangered species:¹ yes, anthropology can do this, and time will tell whether in specific cases it was a good thing to do – or if instead it amounted to championing antiquarianism and obscurantism (as certain African, Marxist, and feminist critics would claim). But here again, considering the threefold class implications of anthropology, it is to be preferred that our African colleagues occupy themselves with these tasks, at their own discretion, on the basis of their own assessment of political necessities and room for manoeuvring, yet with our unwavering moral and material support.

Such support is not entirely without risks if our main goal remains, mercenarily, to safeguard our own direct access to African research sites. The aloofness of

¹ This was written in 1987, and if it were true then, it is no longer true now; see Postscript below.

peripheral or otherwise muted groups in Africa is not an accident of nature or of history, but part of contemporary politics. The African continent has become characterised by the weakness if not downright repression of extra-governmental foci of organisation, opinion, knowledge and criticism, cultural and institutional creativeness. Post-colonial states seek to impose their political and ideological control upon the individuals and groups residing within their territory, streamlining their experience and their performance into controlled uniformity and submission. *African anthropologists* (i.e. professionally qualified and at the same time identifying and identifiable as Africans) now constitute the main (not the only) group to which the implementation of the positive promise of Africanist anthropology is to be entrusted, but their attention for certain groups, themes and problems is bound to be constrained by political sensitivities. As concerns the relation vis-à-vis the state, the class position of African intellectuals including anthropologists may not – in terms of financial and institutional dependence – fundamentally differ from that of their North Atlantic colleagues, but there is certainly an enormous difference in degree: as regards options and alternatives, but also as regards proximity and access to politicians and policy makers. Given the reality of this dependent (if not necessarily uncomfortable) class position, representing peripheral groups should be taken in a scholarly, not a political sense. Anthropology has a role to play, not primarily because research can generate political support or political consciousness (a rather rare occurrence), but because of the discipline's basic philosophical outlook as outlined above. The prolonged and humble exposure to a specific local interaction setting is not only salutary and illuminating to the individual researcher no matter from what continent – it may also help to restore a general respect for peasants and urban proletarians in the intellectual and political debates concerning the planning and implementation of development in Africa today. (Whether the anthropological contribution in the development context could go further than this, is a question I shall address below.) The politically relevant questions can readily be translated (without losing much of their critical relevance) into an agenda for future Africanist anthropological research.

Risking that I too, after all, encroach on a domain which can only be properly demarcated by my African colleagues, let me briefly indicate that such an agenda might include the following items, among many others:

- (a) In an attempt to enrich the existing studies of modern bureaucracy and of state penetration at the local level (by political scientists and administrative lawyers) with specific anthropological approaches (intimate personal detail, transactional historicity and connections with other life sphere: kinship, patronage, friends and neighbours), one should address more systematically the ethnography of power at the local level – including the transformation and manipulation of pre-existing notions of power (such as inform traditional leadership of kings, chiefs, land priests, diviner-healers, etc.) into modern political, administrative and religious organisational bodies.

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- (b) Attention should be paid to the ethnography of peripheral capitalism, with emphasis not only (as hitherto) on the economic aspect of capitalist relations of production and their articulation to pre-existing modes (through cash cropping, migrancy, the urban informal sector, etc.), but also on the ideological and experiential dimensions of peripheral capitalism: for example the radical reconstitution of time, space, person, body and self that springs from the commodification of labour and its products, and from participation in the formal bureaucratic organisations by which peripheral capitalism is increasingly patterned.
- (c) Of great priority is research to be undertaken into the ethnography of peripheral identity formation, addressing such fundamental issues as: ethnography as a basis for historiography; ethnicity and incapsulated so-called traditional rulers; and the manipulation of tradition and neo-tradition as ideological constructions in the context of nation building.

When it comes to the class position of African intellectuals as compared with the peasants and proletarians who, if already by sheer force of numbers, should continue to constitute the main subjects of future Africanist anthropological research, we need not resort to populist myopia, as did the *négritude* movement half a century ago. There is no absolute difference between an African researcher and a North Atlantic one investigating the same African community; nonetheless there is a difference in degree. Of course our African colleagues occupy a middle-class position in their national society – but theirs at least is not tainted by intercontinental class implications as ours is, nor by a history of intercontinental conquest and violence, while the fact that the African anthropologists' research praxis is embedded in an incomparably wider general participation and societal (including linguistic) competence in the national society attenuates and sometimes even takes away the class implications of the production of anthropology at the micro level. In other words, African anthropologists might do fieldwork without needing interpreters and extensive clearances, in their home area, being regarded not as aliens but as included in the patterns of self-identification of their research subjects; and they would work from an initial position of far greater implicit and self-evident understanding of local social and cultural life than could be expected from a North Atlantic expatriate researcher.

Our professional commitment should concentrate on building a strong, African-based anthropology, with all the trimmings of first-class libraries and collections, material research facilities including computers, international and intercontinental academic leadership. If we love Africanist anthropology, we should create, much more consistently and wholeheartedly than we have done so far, the conditions under which African colleagues can take over the subject, or most of it. Once that has happened, we need not to worry about our own occasional access; as Africanists, we all know African hospitality from experience!

4.6. The easy way out? Africanist anthropology and development

Probably to the surprise of my audience, I have failed to link the future of anthropology in Africa to the study of development and to the implementation of development projects. Contrary to the many other omissions in my argument, this one was deliberate.

Yet the dominant discourse within which Africanist research from the North Atlantic area is at present being proposed, funded, executed and written up is that of development, development co-operation, policy relevance. Often the issues concerned have some theoretical basis in the anthropological tradition, or could be linked to such a basis, but neither detached ethnographic description nor theory formation feature any more as manifest primary motives in Africanist anthropological research. Instead, the idiom of development relevance tends to be adopted in applications for research funding since the dextrous display of that idiom now simply constitutes an absolute condition for sheer admittance to the very strong competition over research funds.

It would have been praiseworthy if behind this trend there was an awareness (based on open and passionate intellectual debate) of the obvious intellectual limitations of anthropology and of the need to ground its ambitious theoretical project in concrete real-life situations such as can be found in development projects. But that is scarcely the case. The real driving force behind this trend seems to lie in the growing disenchantment, and subsequent financial dissociation, between North Atlantic political elites and the universities. Academic freedom in the selection and execution of research requires a context of material security, but instead researchers are forced to operate as entrepreneurs on a partly non-academic market of research funds voted in a context of development co-operation. Even in specific cases where the actual financial pressure is not particularly acute, subtle mechanisms of self-censorship and mutual social control at work among the academic community make sure that research proposals tune in with the dominant ideology of developmentalism – the current ideological framework for North Atlantic dealings with the rest of the world. As researchers and academic administrators we have become rather good at identifying and selecting research topics whose development potential and societal relevance is unmistakable, and at rephrasing our academic pipe-dreams, pruning the theoretical and ethnographic interest and processing an original inspiration into the developmentalist jargon of fundable proposals.

Over the past quarter of a century we have seen plenty of anthropologically inspired missions, explorations, surveys, reconnaissance studies, feasibility studies, etc., all conceived within a context of development co-operation. Their logic, time schedule, and perception of the local societies under study show a wide range of variation, and often the professional idiom and even the fieldwork praxis of anthropology may have been adopted. Still, I cannot think of these attempts as anthropology in terms of the definition offered above. The role of intercontinental dependency relations in development cooperation; the mediating and often exploitative role of post-colonial states and their bureaucratic and political elite in

the implementation of development projects; the pragmatic, goal-orientated, routinised, level of intellectual production in development contexts; the massive consensus as to the primacy of the capitalist and bureaucratic logic and the desiderata the latter prescribe – all this may constitute an increasingly dominant, competent, complex, perhaps even a legitimate, intercontinental discourse,¹ but it is not the discourse of anthropology. To the development discourse, anthropology remains an auxiliary subject, offering among other things ready-made, digestible and respectable (but by the time they have penetrated to the development bureaucracy, usually already obsolete) models of interpretation for impatient and overworked development workers.

To claim a more central position for anthropology in the development context – to advocate climbing the development bandwagon as anthropologists, would simply mean to leave the intercontinental class implications of anthropology unanalysed, and trading them for another, now more fashionable version of intercontinental domination: *development*. The best anthropology could offer in this context is a profound and systematic critique of the development discourse; however, considering the impressive amount of political power and material resources that is invested in the development industry, it is hardly realistic to base the future of anthropology on such a critical role, however desirable and timely.

Some indication of the future relations between anthropology and development can already be gleaned from the debate on ‘culture and development’, now gaining impetus in many European countries:² without context, ideological history or critique, without any situational analysis of the multiplicity of culture nor any perspective on the politico-economic conditions under which culture may, or may not, take on a relative autonomy, a dated, fossilised and reified concept of (other people’s) culture is now being proposed as a panacea when it comes to the explanation of the relative failure of a quarter of a century of development aid. It is as if development workers are saying:

‘they may not have developed as stipulated, but that is because all the time they had their own culture, and that may yet be a positive sign of identity ...’.

Anthropology ought not to lend itself to such a new form of paternalism and ideological mystification, and should instead challenge it.

However, the situation is not always so clear-cut as I suggest it to be here. For often it is not distant outside agencies, but African institutions and the informants themselves, who expect ‘development action’ from the anthropologist, during or after the fieldwork. Then the anthropologist is in a position to bring to bear the best his profession has to offer, in terms of local knowledge, systematic analysis and communication skills, and use all of that to negotiate between development agencies

¹ For a fundamental critique of development from an anthropological perspective, cf. Hobart 1993. For my own views, cf. van Binsbergen 1991c, 1999h, and chapter 10.

² Cf. Banuri 1990; Okolo Okonda W’Oleko 1986; Uhlenbeck n.d.; Worsley 1984.

and bureaucracies, on the one hand, and, on the other, the people who extended their hospitality and co-operation in the course of fieldwork. The latter should not become the victims of an intellectual quest for purity such has dominated the present argument.

4.7. Postscript 2002

When I went through the above text in order to add, fifteen years later, the bibliographical references it lacked in its originally published form, I was torn between two impressions. On the one hand, the text seemed to survive as a summary of the beauty and the pitfalls of anthropology. On the other hand, it appeared as remarkably dated, throwing in relief the many developments which, over the past one and a half decades, have taken place

- (a) in Africa, and
- (b) in Africanist anthropology.

A full account on these points would be beyond our present scope. Let me merely indicate a number of points that readily come to mind.

4.8. Post-1987 developments in and around Africa

4.8.1. The resilience of historic African institutions, but not because of any preservation attempts on the part of anthropologists!

In my 1987 argument I sketched a positive picture of the unique contribution of anthropology as giving a voice to the voiceless, representing peripheral institutions and people who otherwise would perish unnoticed. I am afraid that this well-intended position, largely inspired by my experiences among the Zambian Nkoya, carried more of the 'White man's burden' than I cared to admit at the time.¹ Subsequent developments have shown that many African institutions, even (or especially) those that are scarcely touched by the post-colonial state and its imported rationality, can take care of themselves surprisingly well and show a remarkable power of resilience, even without any preservation attempts on the part of anthropologists. If we may concentrate on the two topics mentioned in my article: chieftainship and puberty rites, far from disappearing under modern conditions, have

¹ The expression 'the White man's burden' summarised the White colonialists' legitimation for their involvement with societies in Africa and Asia: given Europe's allegedly exalted levels of civilisation, social and political organisation, science and technology, Europe, allegedly, simply had no choice but to help bring the rest of the world to its own level; of course, this was an elegant dissimulation of the North-South exploitation involved, even though in individual cases (e.g. Lord Lugard) the ideology of the White man's burden, with all its condescension, may have produced a respectable ethical stance. Cf. Jordan 1974; Davidson 1992; Harlan 1988.

made a remarkable comeback in the 1990s, and the main contribution of North Atlantic research on these topics has been to record this resilience and identify its probable causes. The available research suggests two major factors among others: the fact that these institutions are time-honoured ways, of proved effectiveness, to deal with perpetual central issues facing local societies (authority, order, the management of conflict, role preparation, gender and age differences, the acquisition of an effective social identity); and the fact that they draw on sources of cosmological meaning and self-identity whose continued relevance may have been eroded by modernisation, the advent of capitalism, etc. in the course of the twentieth century, yet were far from destroyed by these influences.¹

4.8.2. Some intellectual developments in Africa since 1987

In the beginning of the third millennium CE, it remains difficult for a scholar working in Africa to compete with those stationed in the North Atlantic region. Yet, since the late 1980s a number of positive developments have taken place concerning the localisation of African anthropology, and largely in the direction indicated in my 1987 paper, with African anthropologists' having Internet access, attending intercontinental conferences, obtaining fellowships in the North Atlantic region, being the beneficiaries of affirmative action on the part of certain well-intending agencies in the North; and especially developing their own continental and regional platforms of scholarly co-operation, such as CODESRIA, with their own fairly localised and independent systems of funding, publication, awards, definition of continental and regional research priorities, international conferences, etc. And there is much more. African academic philosophy, having started in the 1950s with the works of Kagame and Diop,² has further established itself as a globally recognised expression of self-identity.³ Subsequently, cosmopolitan philosophers from Africa, foremost Mudimbe and Appiah, have successfully broken through the continental boundaries of African philosophy's orientation, illuminating both Africa's predicaments as (especially in Mudimbe's work) providing a sound epistemological critique of North Atlantic knowledge production on Africa.⁴ Afrocentricity⁵ and the

¹ Cf. Rasing 1995, 2001; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & van Dijk 1999; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & Ray 1996; Nana Arhin Brempong *c.s.* 1994; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & Griffiths 1987; van Binsbergen 2003b.

² Kagame 1955; Diop 1948, 1955.

³ Like for all the various domains of academic production paraded in my 1987 article and the present postscript, it is almost impossible to give a reasoned bibliography without writing another article, or book, on the subject. My aim is merely to indicate a body of literature which the reader may further explore. For African philosophy, cf. Coetzee & Roux 1998; Eboussi Boulaga 1977; Eze 1997a; Gyekye 1995, 1997b; Hallen & Sodipo 1986; Hountondji 1976; Keita 1985; Kimmerle 1991a; Masolo 1994; Mbiti 1990; Mudimbe 1988; Odera Oruka 1975, 1990b; Okafor 1993; Okere 1983; Oluwole 1992; Ramose 1999; Serequeberban 1994; Sogolo 1993; Bewaji 1994; Wamba-dia-Wamba 1992; Wiredu 1972, 1980, 1990.

⁴ Cf. Appiah 1992; Mudimbe 1988, 1994, 1997; Mudimbe & Appiah 1993; van Binsbergen 2001a.

⁵ Seminal Afrocentrist writings include: Diop 1955, 1959; Asante 1982, 1987; Obenga 1990, 1995a, 1995b. For well-documented but largely dismissive critical assessments, cf. Fauvelle 1996; Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.*

Black Athena debate¹ (intellectual developments largely independent from most of academic African philosophy and even frowned upon by the cosmopolitan philosophers from Africa) have created a framework in which new and inspiring questions can be asked about Africa's place in global cultural history – questions which have since been picked up in the political arena around the concept of the African Renaissance (first formulated by Diop, now reformulated by the South African president Mbeki).² This last point reminds us of the fact that, in ways rather unpredictable in 1987, South Africa's attainment of majority rule in the early 1990s has in principle put the most developed material and intellectual national infrastructure of the African continent at the service of Africa as a whole – albeit at the very real risk of South African continental hegemony. The blessings of the Internet have been appropriated by African intellectuals so that they can participate in these developments much more directly and centrally.

Let us now proceed to look at changes in Africanist anthropology since the late 1980s.

4.9. Post-1987 developments in and around Africanist anthropology

4.9.1. Anthropology partially hijacked by the development industry

In my 1987 article I wrote:

‘The prolonged and humble exposure to a specific local interaction setting is not only salutary and illuminating to the individual researcher no matter from what continent – it may also help to restore a general respect for peasants and urban proletarians in the intellectual and political debates concerning the planning and implementation of development in Africa today.’

On second thoughts, this passage (directly inspired by my own research among the Zambian Nkoya) seems unrealistically utopian. In the 1980s the international development industry and the World Bank discovered the local aid recipients' ‘culture’ (conceived in a remarkably reified and fragmented format: one distinct ‘culture’ for each ‘tribe’ or ‘ethnic group’) as the black box that explained why North Atlantic development projects seldom produced the intended results. But instead of adopting the standard anthropological methods of prolonged and profound, methodologically informed local immersion, the development industry decided it would have cultural knowledge without paying the usual anthropological price of time, effort and frustration. Rapid Rural Appraisals and similar quick assessment methods were to convey the illusion of valid knowledge of, and about,

2000, English translation in preparation; Howe 1999; for a view opposing Howe and defending Afrocentrism in academia, cf. van Binsbergen 2000d.

¹ Bernal 1987, 1991, 2001; Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers 1996; Berlinerblau 1999; van Binsbergen 1997a, 2000c.

² Cf. Diop 1948, 1996; Mbeki 1999.

local peasants, without any danger of upsetting the development experts' time-table, comforts, preconceived ideas, and other forms of North Atlantic one-way intervention.¹ The appeal to anthropology has thus become counter-productive, serving to conceal the continued reliance on a one-sidedly imposed hegemonic rationality from the North. And although in recent years the World Bank has employed anthropologists and has been inspired by an actor-orientated approach like Sen's,² at the centre of the World Bank's models of South poverty and economic action there is still no coherent vision as to how good professional anthropology is to be combined with the kind of knowledge production needed to underpin policy decisions like the World Bank's, that profoundly affect the economic situation of many hundreds of millions of people.³

4.9.2. Beyond development research: The increased accommodation between Africanist research and government in the Netherlands

In my 1987 paper I gave a bleak picture of the relations between anthropologists and the development industry, which then was largely dominated by government ministries to which non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were affiliated, both in the North and in the South. Soon NGOs were to become a hot topic in development studies and policy,⁴ without however far-reaching effects on the relations between governments and anthropologists. It is my, no doubt myopic, impression that this relation has undergone considerable improvement over the past decade and a half. If we may take the, relatively ideal, situation of the African Studies Centre, Leiden (the national institution for Africanist social research in the Netherlands) as indicative of more general trends in the North Atlantic region, a number of interesting points may be made. The Netherlands government support for professional Africanist research has grown, rather than dwindled. But whereas in the late 1980s government saw such research as more directly and recognisably ancillary to its own bilateral development endeavours in the Third World (a situation little conducive to academic independence, and breeding a mercenary genre of research proposals predictably geared to the research priorities known to be currently – but never for long – in fashion at the Ministry of Development Co-operation), in the course of the 1990s relations between researchers and the government became much more relaxed and trustful at the personal level, while at the same time government pressure upon researchers to pursue readily applicable forms of research gave way to the awareness, among civil servants, that more fundamental and theoretically orientated research, defined primarily by academic priorities, had a far greater power of

¹ Cf. Geschiere 1993.

² Cf. Sen 1982.

³ Cf. Swiatkowski 2002.

⁴ Bratton 1990; Cernea 1990; Fowler 1985, 1991, 1993; Kothari 1988; NGO Landenstudie 1991; Shaw 1990; Thomas 1992; van Binsbergen 1992c.

inspiration and illumination for state institutions. The trend of disenchantment between academia and government, signalled for the 1980s in my original text, has not persisted in the next decades, or at least not consistently for Africanist research.¹ It is my impression that similar trends can be picked up elsewhere in the North Atlantic region.

4.9.3. The decline of fieldwork

My 1987 paper depicts an anthropology that is still liberating itself from the limitations of the classic model as established in the second third of the twentieth century. In this form of anthropology, fieldwork was all-important, and many of the appreciative as well as critical things I say about anthropology revolve on fieldwork. Since 1987, however, the tradition of extensive, prolonged fieldwork has considerably declined in anthropology, for a number of reasons:

- increased health risks (especially AIDS, ebola, cholera, etc.);
- lack of funding;
- the increased actual globalisation of the contemporary world, which makes repeated short visits to the field much easier than in previous decades, but also creates the illusion of recognisable similarity across cultural situations worldwide – and which is less conducive to a massive investment, spanning several years minimum, towards the strictly local investigation of cultural specificity;
- the rapidly increasing spread of worldwide *linguae francae*, especially English, adding to the illusion of worldwide similarity and making it possible to conduct fieldwork in local settings yet through the time-saving medium of a *lingua franca* even though this implies the distortion resulting from a *double translation filter*: both on the part of the researcher and of the research participants;
- the overestimation of theory at the expense of empirical studies in the social sciences today;
- the emergence of globalisation as a field of study, stimulating multi-sited field research which follows culturally and linguistically accessible, for globalised, participants in their peregrinations, but which in each location achieves rather less than extensive and prolonged exposure and therefore less than profound socio-cultural knowledge;
- the revival of comparative and diffusionist studies, which cannot possibly rely on the results of extensive fieldwork in just one place.²

¹ I believe that here specific praise is due to Stephen Ellis and Gerti Hesselting, the two successive directors of the African Studies Centre in the 1990s, who each in their own very different way contributed to effective state/research relations, essentially without sacrificing academic independence.

² On this point, cf. Amselle 2001, who signals this recent development (partly by reference to my own neo-diffusionist studies) even though he frowns upon it. The present book contains other instalments of such studies, especially in chapters 7 and 8; also cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (d), (e).

One could appreciate the decline of fieldwork as anthropology's timely methodological adjustment to an unmistakably changing research object; or one could regret this development because of the furtive superficiality it increasingly allows to pass for decent research. Meanwhile, however, we have become aware of theoretical and epistemological disadvantages of the classic fieldwork format.

When a foreign researcher has to invest years of her life in mastering a local linguistic and cultural domain, chances are that this disproportionate investment (often at great personal costs of frustration, conflict, health risks, broken relationships at home, etc.) leads to personal reification of that domain and its perceived boundaries – hence a reification of culture, ethnicity and identity, rather than an awareness of the way in which cultural and ethnic identity claims are political statements within a politics of difference, against the background of multiplicity of identities, and far greater cultural similarity and continuity that such politics of difference could profitably accommodate.¹

And the reification of culture tends to go hand in hand with the reification of the fieldworker's own knowledge as acquired in the field. In my 1987 text I have stressed the notion of *culture being acquired through a learning process* as the central idea behind fieldwork. But epistemologically there is also another central idea responsible for making participatory fieldwork the hallmark of the anthropological discipline: the professional myth, among anthropologists, that the *violence of representation*, the inevitable distortion-transformation-innovation that invariably and necessarily adheres to any hermeneutics (and most modern ethnography is highly hermeneutical), may be avoided provided one develops the proper *rapport* with the local informants, and adopts without the slightest reservation the greatest possible identification with the life and manners of one's hosts in the field. Surely, an immensely profound and largely gratifying intercultural human encounter awaits every serious and dedicated fieldworker; but this does not mean that as a technique of knowledge production, fieldwork is capable of escaping from the otherwise inevitable hermeneutical distortion. Yet anthropologists tend to look upon problems of representation and validity in fieldwork-based ethnography as a matter of degree, as a problem that one can more or less successfully solve by adoption of the proper method of 'going native'. An increasing awareness of this epistemological pitfall of fieldwork has certainly helped to liberate anthropology from what has effectively become, in the course of the twentieth century, the oppressive professional myth of fieldwork; the present book seeks to contribute to this awareness, but only after its author spend most of his professional life inside that pitfall.

¹ On these issues extensively van Binsbergen 1999a/2002d, included in the present book as chapter 15, and many of the other chapters.

4.9.4. My 1987 argument reveals a fundamental crisis in my identity as a North Atlantic anthropologist

In 1987 I had been one of the two academic directors of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for seven years. My being invited to the sister-institution at Edinburgh, in 1987, to officiate on the future of anthropology of Africa, was in itself a sign that by then I was recognised, at the age of forty, as a leading European anthropologist. There had been other such signs, such as my election to the highly prestigious Simon professorship at Manchester, which even had to be postponed because I was younger than the stipulated thirty years old. Yet my 1987 paper reveals, on re-reading, a tremendous uncertainty as regards my identity as an anthropologist: that identity is said to have been exploded by the interdisciplinary nature of my pursuit of African Studies; more important, Africanist anthropology is better left to those who, as Africans, have a birthright no North Atlantic anthropologist could ever claim; and, at the personal level, the built-in contradictions of the anthropologists' role can only temporarily be overcome in the concrete interaction during fieldwork, but continue to add an almost unbearable burden of hegemony and exploitation to any North Atlantic anthropological professional practice. No wonder that soon after that paper was written, when I undertook prolonged fieldwork in a new setting (urban Botswana), those contradictions landed me in a personal crisis. From this crisis I emerged,

- first as a Southern African diviner-priest or *sangoma* – thus seeking to transform myself into a honorary African, for whom the problem of birthright in Africanist knowledge production would appear to be solved in an effective though unexpected way: trading professional knowledge production (with its unsolvable problems of class, instrumentality and hermeneutics) for the adoption of an intercultural identity as a local diviner-priest, implying knowledge that is used not interpreted, and a practice whose aspects of instrumentality and inequality are defined and justified in African instead of in North Atlantic professional terms);
- and subsequently (resigning myself to the fact that I could not resolve the unbearable contradictions of anthropology either from within that discipline or as a *sangoma*) I emerged as a professor of intercultural philosophy seeking to develop a theory of interculturality, using philosophy to critique anthropology, and anthropology to critique philosophy.

That trajectory, and its possible relevance for others than myself, is discussed at length elsewhere in the present book.¹ Let me merely signal here that my 1987 paper constituted a landmark that makes my subsequent itinerary much clearer at least to myself.

¹ Introduction, Part III, and chapter 15.

4.9.5. Not just a personal crisis

That I was not the only one to suffer under the contradictions of the anthropological discipline including the shallow, largely neo-positivist epistemology underlying much mainstream anthropological work, was already obvious by the late 1980s.¹ As a result, the orientation of anthropology has changed somewhat since then, and not only because of the demise of then flourishing paradigms (such as that of the articulation of modes of production) and the decline of prolonged fieldwork.

The globalisation of the world has led to a globalisation of anthropology, with new questions and new challenges.² The 1990s saw a spate of social science research on globalisation. While the specific theoretical harvest in terms of new concepts and theories to understand a multicultural, globalising, meta-local world has been limited, a number of interesting trends have either been initiated in the context of globalisation studies, or have been strengthened by them:

- The critique of fieldwork as a naïvely localising strategy;
- The rise of neo-diffusionism;
- The emphasis on global religious movements as important vehicles for the movement of ideas, people and organisational forms;
- The elaboration of (problematized, and actively constructed) locality as a critical concept in the light of which to re-read and re-analyse much of the pre-existing anthropology;
- The elaboration of virtuality as a new focus on the relation between the imaginary, the ritual, and the social organisational;
- The increased emphasis on commodities and commodification (hence consumption) as a key to understanding processes of localisation and globalisation;
- The closer rapprochement between anthropology and contemporary philosophy (critique of the concept of culture; increased epistemological sophistication; the adoption of post-structuralist models for thought);
- The acknowledgement of other, para-academic forms of globalising knowledge construction and representation, facilitated by the technologies of globalisation (ICT, international travel, etc.), with an increasing impact on identity, performance and conflict (Afrocentricity, Islam, diasporic ethnic networks, etc.).

¹ Similar misgivings were phrased, e.g., by Fabian 1983; whereas the postmodernist critique of anthropology was to insist that anthropology's claim of constituting a science was in itself part of its narrative conventions as, essentially, a genre of creative literature, prone to levels of imagination and psychoanalytical transference hitherto unsuspected and certainly unmentionable in anthropological circles; cf. Clifford & Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988b; Sangren 1988; Pool 1991; Polier & Roseberry 1989; Geuijen 1992; Abbink 1989.

² Cf. Appadurai 1997; Bauman 1998; Fardon *et al.* 1999; Featherstone 1990, 1995; Griffin & Rahman 1992; Hirst & Thompson 1996; Kearney 1995; King 1991; Meyer & Geschiere 1998; Nederveen Pieterse 1994; Robertson 1992; Robertson & Lechner 1985; Soares 1997; van Binsbergen 1995b, 1997f, 1998a; van der Veer 1996; Warnier 1999.

After a decade (the 1990s) in which globalisation has been a major shibboleth for the organisation and funding of research, we are faced with the challenge of defining the priorities, blind spots, red herrings and dead ends of globalisation-orientated social research, especially of such research with a regional more specifically Africanist focus. And with increasing globalisation, cultural relativism, while remaining the cornerstone of the anthropological discipline, has come under attack for political, intercultural philosophical, and epistemological reasons.¹ In this overall climate of internal contradictions and external changes, intercultural philosophy² has emerged as a major critique of, and advance beyond, anthropology, ready for me to step into and to further develop there (under new inspiration, with a new set of colleagues and a new context of ongoing debates) the older and more persistent questions of anthropology whose perplexing nature led to a stalemate when I wrote my 1987 argument.

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1999a/2002d, included in the present book as chapter 15; also cf. chapter 7.

² Cf. Kimmerle 1991b, 1994b; Kimmerle & Wimmer 1997; Mall 1995; Mall & Lohmar 1993; van Binsbergen 1999a/2002d, included in the present book as chapter 15 – and this book as a whole.

PART III.

FROM ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORKER IN SOUTHERN AFRICA,
TO NORTH ATLANTIC DIVINER-PRIEST:

AN EXPERIMENT IN INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

Becoming a *sangoma*

Religious anthropological fieldwork in Francistown, Botswana

5.1. Introduction

In my research into the urban therapeutic scene in Francistown, a rapidly growing town in north-eastern Botswana, I set out to contrast the symbolic and organisational features of two dominant religious expressions:¹ churches of the spirit, and mediumistic *sangoma* cult lodges. Tracing the biographical and therapeutic trajectory of a number of inhabitants of Francistown, it turns out that the social and psycho-somatic complaints of patients in both types of therapy are very similar. However, the *sangoma* cult idiom seeks to establish, in the consciousness of the clients, a coherent image of a viable and meaningful social order anchored in the village, adorcism² of ancestors and continuity with the past – persuading them to embrace a traditional world view that until then may hardly have been part of their adult consciousness. A minority of the patients become permanent adepts of the *sangoma* cult, swelling the ranks of the lodge membership that, in addition to recruited patients, comprises selected members of the consanguineal and affinal kin of the lodge leader. Through the person of their leader, each lodge is tributary to the region's dominant territorial cult of Mwali or Ngwali.³ By contrast, the Christian idiom emphasises personal rupture vis-à-vis the rural-based kin group, exorcism of ancestral and other rural-associated spirits (foremost the *Shumba* or *Lion* cult), and reinforces the clients as participants in an urban capitalist economy experienced by them as painful, meaningless, yet attractive. Thus my project is situated⁴ in a fast

¹ Van Binsbergen 1990a.

² De Heusch's term; cf. Lewis 1990.

³ Cf. Werbner 1977a, 1989a; Ranger 1979, 1985a; Schoffeleers & Mwanza 1979; Daneel 1970a; Mtutuki 1976; and references cited there.

⁴ Cf. Oosthuizen *et al.* 1989; Werbner 1989a; Comaroff 1985; Hammond-Tooke 1989; Schoffeleers 1991b; Janzen 1992; and references cited there.

growing body of recent literature on healing and socio-cultural transformation in Southern Africa.

The local dynamics of race relations made Francistown a painfully difficult environment to explore questions of historical African religion, even when such religion was evidently a major (though often dissimulated) component in the urbanites' consciousness: as a White man, and as a foreigner, I was largely refused research access to these aspects of Francistonian life. The present chapter describes how I struggled to solve this research problem, and in the process became so involved with the *sangoma* cult that I departed radically from the original purpose of the fieldwork – not to say that that original purpose was defeated.

Botswana is the fourth country in Africa where, since 1968, I have conducted fieldwork on religion and therapy. Those familiar with my work have seen me pass through a rather rapid succession of paradigms: from the positivist collection of quantitative data on the recruitment of spirit mediums (*faqīr*, plur. *fūqra*) in the highlands of north-western Tunisia, via Marxist reductionism explaining away cults of affliction (particularly the *Bituma* cult) in western Zambia as a local idiom expressing the articulation of modes of production, to a symbolically somewhat more sensitive exploration of the convergence of bodily and territorial symbolism in Manjak oracular cults in Guinea-Bissau.

In my first Tunisian fieldwork I remained an observing outsider, encountering for the first time in my life the shocking directness of the epiphany of the sacred through ecstatic religion. Parallel to the professional *fūqra* sessions as staged publicly at saints' festivals as well as in the relative privacy of a homestead, those who were not eligible for *faqir*-hood (or who had opted out of that status because of its socio-political marginality) would frequently, as part of an evening's musical entertainment among kinsmen, friends and neighbours, stage perfect imitations of the *fūqra*'s art, and it was on those occasions that I learned the bodily movements, singing and respiratory techniques attributed to the initiates. In 1970, during a 'genuine' session, I was allowed to dance along not just with the imitators but with the *fūqra* themselves; I entered into an incipient trance, but was immediately called back, primarily by my first wife who was present. The restrictive brand of social anthropology I was reading in the Netherlands at the time did not stimulate any further existential explorations into the ecstatic experience itself,¹ and only two decades later a long novel written in the non-academic intimacy of my mother tongue² was to serve as the outlet for what I had not been able to capture and come to terms with in scholarly discourse. Much of my other literary work has been moulded out of the spillover of fieldwork experiences (but deriving its primary inspiration not from fieldwork *per se* but from a more general personal quest, one leg of which forms the subject of the present chapter).

¹ However, for an analytical exploration, cf. van Binsbergen 1981a: ch. 2.

² Van Binsbergen 1988a.

In my next, and much more extensive, Zambian fieldwork I was again drawn to the study of ecstatic religion, but while I was deeply involved with a family of cult leaders and adepts, and sponsored several sessions for that family's junior women, my personal ritual participation remained confined to shaking a rattle in the chorus and attending to the complex logistics ensuring the presence of drums and firewood during the ecstatic session. I noted the amazing similarity between the Zambian adepts' dancing and trance and the Tunisian forms, across thousands of kilometres, and I avidly consumed papers on the spread of ecstatic cults across the African continent in recent centuries. However, the academic success of my Marxist interpretation of the Zambian material prevented me, once again, from sounding out the ecstatic depths, let alone plunging into them myself. The idea that the ecstatic approach to healing, as found in so many cultures, could be more than an external research topic, could be incorporated into my own personal life, was still far from me. Instead, I was persuaded to provide an informal outlet for Western medicine at my rural research site in Zambia,¹ and this unexpected and unqualified exercise of the doctor's role gave me immense satisfaction; steps were taken to formalise this initiative through the establishment of a local clinic, to be financed with Dutch aid money, and to be staffed by the Zambian government, and this project took fifteen years to materialise due mainly to the weakness of people's self-organisation at the local level.

By the late 1970s, my repeated fieldwork and thus increasing involvement in the life and language of the Zambian Nkoya began to pose serious problems of personal and family boundary management in my movements back and forth between western Zambia and western Europe, but even when this had me thoroughly disorientated it was still only jokingly, flippantly, that I considered the possibility of phrasing my being torn between 'there' and 'back again'² in terms of possession by a Zambian affliction spirit – even though I had learned to interpret the cults of affliction³ in terms of traders' and labour migrants' boundary crossing, geographical and cultural displacement, and the linkage between distinct socio-cultural complexes termed 'modes of production'. Yet, was the situation of these African travellers not reminiscent of the anthropological fieldworker's?

It was only in 1983, during new fieldwork on the therapeutic effectiveness of oracles and land priests in Guinea-Bissau – no ecstatic religion in this thoroughly

¹ Van Binsbergen 1979a.

² Van Binsbergen 1979b.

³ A *cult of affliction* in the African context tends to combine two features. In the first place it is, by definition, a cult that addresses a state of personal malfunctioning which is *emically* interpreted, in the local cultural context, in terms of illness attributed to the highly person-specific action of a supernatural being or force. And, secondly, such illness cults often display the following pattern of recruitment, organisation and spread: cult leaders recruit new adepts as patients seeking treatment, while the latter, having gone through the cult, may graduate to become cult leaders/healers recruiting new adepts/patients in their turn – a chain reaction often conducive to rapid geographical spread and numerical growth of such cults.

‘Apollonian’¹ gerontocratic culture, except perhaps in secret women’s cults I had no access to – that I crossed an essential boundary and became a participant-as-patient, deriving benefits of personal healing from an idiom that only months before had been utterly unknown to me. These cults did cater for the local rice-cultivating villagers, but a large proportion of their clients were returning labour migrants from Senegal and France, and in addition their clientèle comprised non-locals from all over Guinea-Bissau and Southern Senegal: people who had to use a national *lingua franca* in their contacts with the cultic personnel and whose understanding of the cults’ transactions was only based on such simplified symbolic and aetiological interpretations as could be quickly explained to them in one or two sessions. The priests’ response made it clear that in these respects their African patients from distant places did not fundamentally differ from me or from occasional other White (Portuguese) clients. Intrigued by the ease and eagerness with which I embraced Manjak society, a Western-trained psychiatrist with whom I undertook the project jointly – in general a sober positivist – ventured an explanation that was to take on a new meaning in later years: could I be the European incarnation of an African?

The above summarises what I brought to my fieldwork in Francistown in 1988. Focusing on the contemporary transformation of culture in an urban setting (which was thought to mediate between a rural-based tradition and the modern state), I was of course keen to explore the urban manifestations – if any – of the region’s Mwali cult. Yet I realised that the limited time available for fieldwork and language learning (a year, later fortunately augmented by shorter trips – but still far too little), the urban setting, the need (imposed by my research plan, institutional affiliation, and funding) to look at many other aspects of the Francistown socio-cultural scene in addition to historic religion,² and the territorial claims long since pegged out locally by other researchers (Terence Ranger, Richard Werbner, Matthew Schoffeleers) who happened to be my closest academic friends, would prevent me from making a major contribution to Mwali studies. At the same time, considering my academic work so far it was to be expected that religion would loom large in my approach to socio-cultural transformations in Francistown, and that the urban trajectory of cults would provide models for my analysis of other aspects of that urban society. While the scale of the urban community would force me to supplement my participant observation with the use of survey methods, I had long put aside the positivism that had guided my Tunisian research. Likewise, while the project was conceived as a study of the culture of peripheral capitalism, I had become convinced that only the selective incorporation of Marxist ideas in mainstream anthropology (*embourgeoisement*, in other words) would allow us to benefit from both the advances, of recent

¹ Cf. Benedict 1946; Nietzsche 1872.

² In order to avoid the controversial term ‘traditional’, I designate by the term ‘historic African religion’ all religious forms that originate on the African continent and that are not manifestly due to the influence of the world religions, especially Islam and Christianity.

Marxism, and of a hundred years of symbolic, kinship, political, etc. anthropology. And yes, I hoped (rather naïvely, as it will turn out, but eventually not in vain) that new African fieldwork with a substantial religious component would mean another instalment of the personally liberating and healing insights that had come my way in Guinea-Bissau, and would further define my own existential position towards an Africa that from an arbitrarily chosen research site in my first graduate project, had become my conscience, my love, my passion, one of the main puzzles of my life.

This should provide sufficient background for the narrative section that is to follow. To the extent of the possible, it is entirely factual.

5.2. A meal in the country

Nata, September 1990. At the fringe of the Kalahari desert, two hundred kilometres north-west of Francistown. Prior to this afternoon, Nata village had stood out mainly as the place where my nostalgia for other, dearer parts had hurt more than anywhere else in Botswana. Along the perfect tar road, near the filling station whose pumps were still hand-operated (but where the best French fries of the whole of northern Botswana were on sale, as well as a larger international assortment of alcoholic beverages than in the tax-free shops of many European airports), one could always find remarkably poorly dressed Zambians, waiting for transport that even they could afford, to reduce, or add to (whatever their destination was), the three hundred kilometres that separated them here from their own country – Zambia, where I was so much at home and that contrasted so sharply with booming Botswana. The aerials of the Nata police compound tower high above a few shops and a much larger number of thatched round houses, with chickens and goats; these houses are said to be largely inhabited by San ('Basarwa', 'Bushmen') people, the sedentarised descendants of the hunters and collectors who form the original inhabitants of this land. Here one speaks Tswana or Kalanga; the San's Khwe language (a sub-division of Khoi-San) does not belong to public life, and somatically the San can hardly be distinguished any more from the Bantu-speakers who have placed themselves over them as cattle lords, shopkeepers and civil servants. Ten kilometres before arriving at Nata, at the edge of wetlands that are flat and open like the polders of my native Holland, just as full of birds and cows and with the same light beckoning with watery reflections, one passes 'Nata Lodge': a camping and bungalow site, surrounded by palms, the regular stopover for South African tourists on their way to the game parks of northern Botswana; here *the lingua franca* is Afrikaans, almost Dutch.

However, that afternoon picture-postcard Nata, 'Where the Real Botswana Begins', formed the provisional end point of a quest to the heart of Africa's symbolic culture.

A quarter of a century after Botswana's independence, Francistown had turned out to be still in the grips of its past of mining, monopoly capitalism and labour migration, and of the racial distinctions this had entailed. During fieldwork in that

town, in the popular site-and-service scheme where my wife, my children and myself had settled as the only European family, we had for almost a year hit on walls of rejection, suspicion, indifference, cramped displays of modernity and dissembled tradition – the common strategies by which the Black urban population of Southern Africa has tried to come to terms with economic and cultural humiliation at the hands of Whites.¹ These strategies secure an African identity in some sort of underground collective African socio-cultural domain inaccessible to Whites. The literature, conversations with colleagues who had wisely limited their research to the rural situation, and extensive trips with town-dwellers to their rural homes, had given me some idea of what went on in the villages around Francistown. In those villages the African tradition is still rather vital: from ancestor veneration to the cult of the High God Mwali, from historic kinship structures to female-centred cults of the wilds. For many months, however, I was flatly denied all access to those aspects of tradition that functioned in the urban setting, in interaction with wage labour and modern formal organisations. Half the time even our greetings were not answered. Such knowledge and experience as I had gained elsewhere in Africa did not count and – to my increasing indignation – my pale skin colour put me on the wrong side in a grim if largely tacit racial feud. In the villages, we shared with the inhabitants the porridge that had been my daily and often only food in so many places in Southern Africa; in town, where despite the supply of bread and fast food this cheap dish is still the principal staple, it was never offered to us:

‘Whites do not eat that sort of thing.’

Nor did our neighbours ever offer us any other food. Little did the people know that I looked at them with the eyes of a villager from Zambia, and that my heart resounded with the perplexed cry by which children in that country challenge the infringement of their elementary rights:

‘You are refusing me porridge?!’

It shows our neighbours’ embarrassed good will, however, that our little son Vincent was sometimes invited to eat with them.

The Black Francistonians’ great reluctance to welcome me as a researcher and as a friend hit me all the more because, following a time-honoured model of participant observation in anthropological fieldwork, as a family we had made the obvious choice of living right in their midst. Anthropologists have been instructed to expect to learn from their day-to-day neighbours; I was not prepared to face the truth that, as an obviously affluent White man living in the exclusively Black lower middle-class site-and-service suburb named Somerset East Extension instead of in one of the traditional White/upper-class residential areas of Francistown, I was transgressing racial and class expectations. This produced more puzzling contradictions than most of my neighbours could deal with: was I a poor White trying to encroach on what

¹ For this point, cf. van Binsbergen 1993a, and in the present book chapter 14 (on *ubuntu*).

little benefits (from the Self-Help Housing scheme implemented at ‘Extension’) Blacks had finally managed to create for themselves? Did not I know that Whites were the Blacks’ hereditary enemies and should not try to live among them as if this historic enmity could be ignored?



Figure 5.1. Geographical space as a constraint on participant observation in a localised community: The fruit of a year’s participant observation in an urban residential area: Somerset East Extension, Francistown, Botswana, 1988-1989.

- 1. occupied residential plots
- 2. non-residential plots
- 3. vacant plots
- 4. researcher’s family’s plot
- 5. social calls did occur between adult residents of this plot, and the researcher’s family
- 6. approximate number of adults’ social calls between this plot (Q) and researcher’s family’s plot (R), November 1988 to October 1989; format: [calls from Q to R]/[calls from R to Q]

Out of 110 occupied residential plots within a 150-metre radius (as indicated by the circle), effective social relations (even of the most casual and infrequent kind) were established with the adult residents of only 11 plots (10%); the disparity between number of social calls from, and to, the researcher’s family’s plot, reflects the active discouragement of such calls on the part of the residents.

If much of Black urban life in Southern Africa consists of a tacit, largely covert and underground, continued private engagement with a mutilated selection of African historic culture in combination with the overt public display of global, White-dominated modernity, who was I to insert myself into the private African sphere and assume I could be anything but an intruder there? Just like all other Whites in Francistown, in the eyes of the Black population I was simply an Afrikaner, a Boer (*liburu*, i.e. a member of a conceptual category that was even denied the characteristic nominal prefix *mo-* which is reserved for human beings).

In a way, it was an under-analysed implication of anthropological assumptions about fieldwork, that made my first year of fieldwork in Francistown sheer agony. This pattern of rejection and isolation is very manifest from the spatial contribution of our neighbourly contacts in 'Extension' (Figure 5.1).

I was used to the open social contexts of Zambia and Guinea-Bissau, which were not dominated by racial boundaries. I took for granted the professional fieldworker's role that I pursued. Thus I expected to further break down social boundaries and to bring about intensive intercultural encounters. It was 1988-1989, it appeared as if apartheid was going to last forever, and all Black inhabitants of Francistown claimed experience with apartheid either in South Africa or at home, at the hands of South African Whites. I had a considerable theoretical and media awareness of the disasters of White physical and social terror in South Africa under apartheid, I had been active in anti-apartheid circles in the Netherlands, had been privileged to meet several of the top ANC leaders in the Lusaka home of the leading activists Jack Simons and Ray Alexander, considered the latter as role models, and could not by any stretch of the imagination accept that I was being implicated in this tragedy *on the Boer side*. For these various reasons it took more than a year, until well *after* the first spell of fieldwork, before I began to realise that what I hit against in Francistown were the Black population's collective, institutionalised patterns of self-protection, further enhanced by the authoritarian Botswana state; they had decided to send much of the ethnic and spiritual aspects of their life underground, away from the public gaze of Francistown, and could not simply drop this collective strategy for the sake of humouring me. Months before this insight dawned upon me, feeling utterly frustrated and betrayed, I fired my first field research assistant, but that did not help: he too was subjected to collective expectations of secrecy which his salary – even though comfortably high – did not help to breach; on the contrary, my role as his employer only reinforced an imposed stereotypical identity which was my greatest handicap in participant observation: my identity as a White *baas* (Afrikaans: 'boss') in Francistown, and predictably (given the local culture of employment relations in Francistown) our relationship ended in a bitter case fought out at the town's Labour Office.

The pressures of this fieldwork made us literally sick, and it was not an illness that the Western physicians of Francistown could heal despite our almost weekly consultations. From a few weeks' delightful visit to the Zambian countryside I returned to face Francistown with increased frustration and impatience. I refused to

play any longer the role of the lone, despised, oft-burglared White man in a Black neighbourhood. Surely it should be possible to introduce into this urban environment my knowledge of a kindred African culture, acquired in Zambia over a twenty-year period, among the Nkoya people, whom – much to the dismissive hilarity of my Francistown neighbours – I insisted on calling ‘my relatives’.

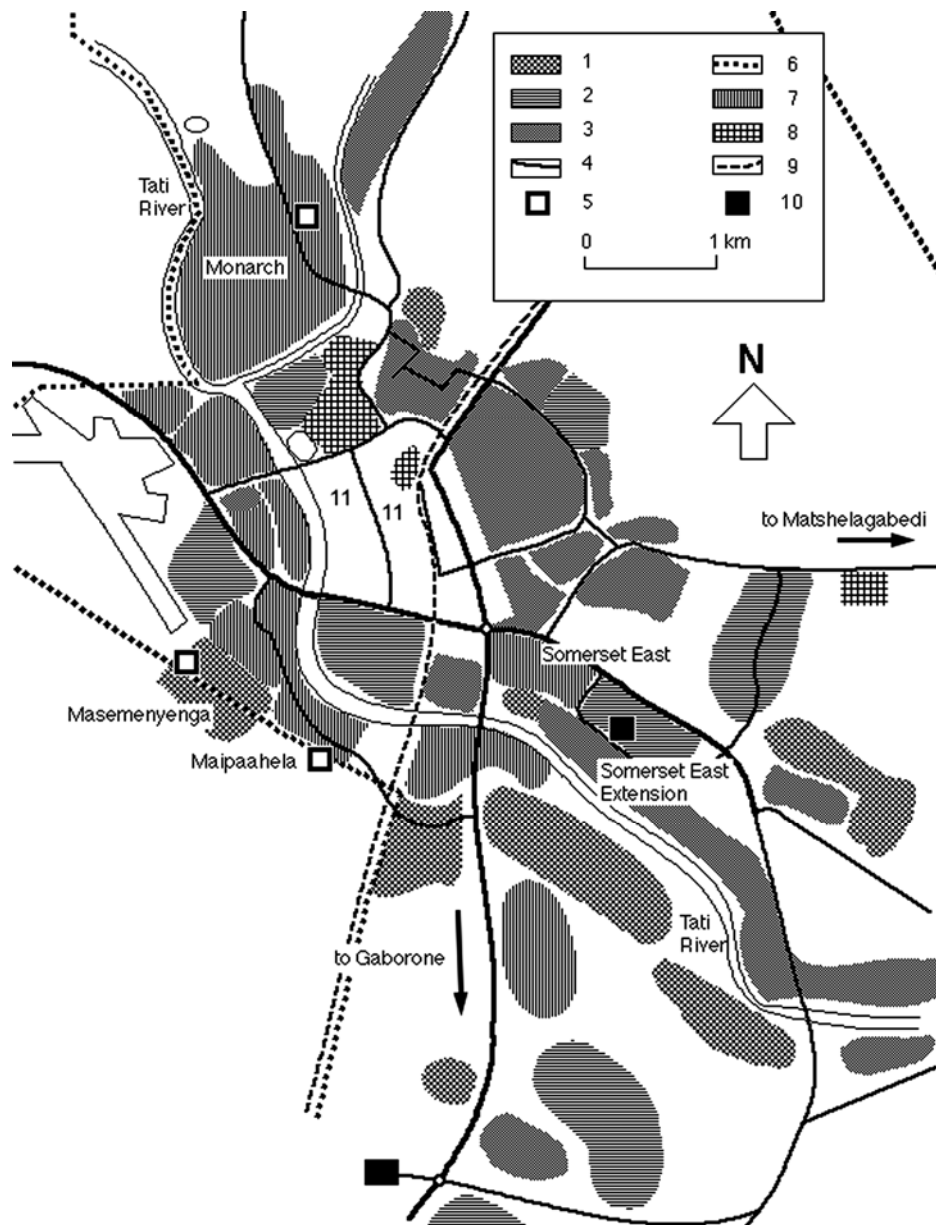


Figure 5.2. *Sangoma* lodges in Francistown, 1989.

- | | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|---|------------|--|
| 1. squatter areas | 2. site-&-service areas | 3. serviced housing (high, medium and low cost) | 4. road | 5. <i>sangoma</i> lodge |
| 6. municipal boundary | 7. upgraded former squatter areas | 8. institutional housing | 9. railway | 10. researcher's family's house, 1988-1989 |
| | | | | 11. central business and shopping district |

Now the time was ripe. Forced to let the role of researcher be temporarily eclipsed by that of patient, my wife Patricia and myself were allowed to step out of our prison of stereotypical Whites. Already at the beginning of our stay we had met Mr Smarts Gumede, an Ndebele, who after twenty-six years as a deep-water cabin steward had been called by his ancestors to become a traditional healer; he had ended up in Francistown, as far from the sea as one can get in Southern Africa. He combined his practice with a small business in vegetables, fat cakes and firewood. It was to him that we referred as a last resort, short of giving up our fieldwork. His response was prompt and to the point. Against the sorcery attacks we were so obviously victim to, he supplied magical substances with which to doctor our yard and bodies; the daily rites (ostentatiously visible to our neighbours) by which we administered these medicines helped us through our most distressful weeks in Francistown. Himself a foreigner from Zimbabwe, he invited us to take a relative view of our situation in terms not of racism but merely of colour-indifferent Botswana xenophobia. And from his business he would always give me some food for Vincent whom he began to call his grandson – the first honorary kinship term to be bestowed upon us in Botswana. Also did Gumede introduce me to his home-boy Joshua Ndlovu, in his fifties a budding *sangoma* seeking to establish himself in the local therapeutic scene, but at the same time a drop-out secondary school teacher holding university degrees and diplomas, and with a considerable academic experience in the USA. With Joshua I could discuss *sangomahood* in terms derived from anthropological textbooks. Impressed by what I could tell him about Zambian cults of affliction, he introduced us to his local network of healers and cult leaders, who rushed to our assistance by word and deed.

Soon we were introduced to a more complex and less mechanical aetiology, at the hands not of a pragmatic herbalist like Gumede (who meanwhile became my first teacher of local divination) but of *sangomas*. One lodge leader, Mr Sithole of the Masemenyenga suburb, interpreted my many complaints (backache, insomnia, high blood pressure, the theft of a unique book manuscript on Zambia ready for publication, of my wedding ring, and of scores of other items from our house) as springing not from the structure of Francistown society, nor from sorcery on the part of our neighbours, but from disrupted relationships between ourselves and our ancestors. We were to improve that relationship and to regain our ancestral protection and anchorage by accepting ritual obligations (such as the killing of goats in our yard, and the wearing of beads); and in the meantime the administration of herbs and fumigation were to combat the more acute suffering. We were greatly impressed when in dramatic divination sessions the specific ancestors were identified who were held responsible for our suffering: my paternal grandfather, who had died in my father's infancy, and – a few weeks later at a different *sangoma* lodge – Patricia's mother's father's mother. These were indeed key figures of our family history, and around them much of the conflict and misery in our respective families was known to have clogged for generations. I had sacrificed a calf, pigs and goats before, to saints and land spirits in Tunisia and Guinea-Bissau, and several times a

year I would still dedicate special family meals to one particular Tunisian saint Sidi Mḥammad, but I was loath to sacrifice to my paternal kin from whom – for what I thought were excellent reasons – I (an illegitimate child anyway) had tried to run away all my life. However, I had enough knowledge of religious anthropology and psychoanalysis to appreciate the therapist's insistence that my submission on this point, precisely, would produce the change I was hoping for:

‘The very force that is afflicting you now, is the one that has pushed you to be a writer’,

as my therapist then divined. He and his colleagues had not the slightest doubt as to the applicability of their ancestral aetiology to us. Instead of the alien collective spirits of distant places, it was our own family history we were made to come to terms with.

Patricia's redressive sacrifice could only be made in the midst of her maternal kin, after our return to Europe; in anticipation we solemnly dedicated and sacrificed a white chicken from the chicken-run in our Francistown yard.

There are a handful of *sangoma* lodges in Francistown, I had interviewed some of their leaders in the beginning of my fieldwork, and one of these leaders, Mrs Rosie Mabutu, by a *teknonym*¹ named MmaNdlovu, of the Maipaahela suburb, insisted that we should frequent her establishment. For a month we spent almost every day and evening there, sometimes staying overnight. Life at the lodge showed us the many layers of ethnic, national and linguistic identities of the members; in a place where diversity, displacement, and (in an idiom of ancestral reincarnation) movement across time were taken for granted and where all day-to-day interaction was geared to produce a viable therapeutic community of fellow-sufferers healing themselves and each other, the social boundaries that had so long shut us out did not seem to exist. In these respects, and in the flexible incorporation of both the rural-orientated tradition and of the money economy, capitalism and mass consumption, the variety of *sangomahood* as found at the Francistown lodges, despite its manifest stress on Zimbabwe Ndebele ethnicity (under which layers of different ethnic, national and linguistic identities are implied in the case of many adepts) differs from the entrenched rural-based forms of Nguni² divinerhood.³ Yet much of the symbolism and conceptual framework that is sometimes fragmented or lost in the ‘cosmopolitan’ variety as found in Francistown, Bulawayo, etc.,⁴ goes back to the rural origin and can only be understood on that basis.

¹ Literally, *teknonym* means: ‘a name derived from one's child’. It is a widespread custom in South Central and Southern Africa to call a person after her or his child, which may be that person's first-born, the first child of the same sex as that person, the last child, the one child the speaker knows best, or a classificatory child (i.e. a classificatory sibling's or classificatory sibling's spouse's child).

² Nguni is an ethnic and cultural cluster in Southern Africa, comprising Zulu, Ndebele, Xhosa and Swazi.

³ As described by, e.g., Berglund 1989; Lee 1969; Ngubane [= Sibisi] 1975, 1977; and references cited there.

⁴ Also cf. du Toit 1971; Staugård 1985; West 1975.

Rosie and her (classificatory) sister (in fact, maternal first cousin) Mrs Elizabeth Mabutu, MmaChakayile, head of a lodge in the Monarch suburb, boasted a White man for their grandfather; my first therapist had incorporated a crystal ball, a present from a grateful White client, among his principal divinatory apparatus. From our subhuman status as Whites, the *sangoma* lodge restored us to be respected human beings, even kinsmen, and here we found the first and only places in Francistown where we genuinely were at home.

But more was happening to my wife and I than incorporation into an accommodating group. We both could hardly talk, think or dream of anything else any more except *sangomahood*. Our awareness of time and space was affected as we were continuously preoccupied with powers that seemed to defy the laws of empirical reality, with reincarnation reversing the flow of time and effacing the boundary between life and death, and with divination that, ranging from past to future, put a deliberate, momentary stop to the very mechanism of time itself. The academic point that the ancestral beings did not have any empirical existence in the present time, first became irrelevant to us, then questionable. Vague ancestral beliefs (my deceased godmother – my mother's sister – taking care of me from heaven) and a comforting childhood trust in my personal guardian angel had been part of my upbringing anyway. My previous African experiences had already merged with my Christian upbringing to provide a composite world view that was mainly mobilised at times of crisis; but we were very much in crisis now.

All this magical and cultic activity, involving local celebrities as officiants, could hardly escape the notice of our neighbours, and it was not entirely without glee that from un-greeted pariahs who did not even deserve to be lied to consistently and elaborately, we were eventually recognised, perhaps even feared, as being well-versed in the sphere of healers and spirit medium specialist frequenting the ancestral world. Many town-dwellers in Botswana realise that they have largely lost access to the ancestral world; others continue to have such access, but dissimulate this state of affairs in overt urban life, and instead cultivate in town an 'underground' domain of African life which is to remain secluded from the public gaze and to which Whites are denied entry. Yet for most African Francistonians, the ancestral world remains the touchstone and the source of happiness and success, the traditionally and rurally anchored censor of their accomplishments in modern life. And however White and with Afrikaans/Boer connotations, we were recognised to be moving into that domain.

According to a general African mode of thought with which I had long been familiar¹ and which was also prevalent in Francistown, serious illness constitutes primarily an indication that the patient has been called to become a healer: the ancestors manifest themselves – through illness – not in order to destroy their descendant but to let him or her, via specific ritual steps, partake of their strength through incarnation. Therefore the therapies that Patricia and I myself underwent

¹ That of the 'cult of affliction'; cf. above, and: van Binsbergen 1981a.

were to be combined with training in diagnostic techniques, in preparation for an expected near future when we would be healers ourselves. Initially Patricia progressed farthest in this respect, as a member of a group of women who, under Rosie Mabutu's direction, would – both in the privacy of Rosie's lodge, and publicly, out in the townships – stage cultic dances in the black-white-red uniform of *hosannas*,¹ adepts of the Mwali cult. From this they derived not only healing for themselves but also (once the crucial threshold of ecstasy would have been crossed, and a *hosanna* ancestral spirit would take possession of the adept's body, showing its presence by rendering the host speechless and rigid, uttering a long inarticulated wailing cry), eligibility for the socially recognised status of healer. However, in her matter-of-factness Patricia never came closer to public ecstasy than when (overcome, as a true adept should be, by the spiritual forces then set loose) she fainted at the funeral of Rosie, whose sudden death under suspect circumstances, immediately after having tea with her classificatory sister Jeannette, put an end to this therapeutic episode only a month after it had started.

Our hopes of finding social acceptance in Francistown were smashed once again and in fact our predicament had increased, for having progressed from being researchers to being patients, the latter role could not be brought to consummation due to Rosie's death. As members of the lodge's inner circle my wife and I shared in all the details of funerary procedure. We witnessed as a matter of course the dramatic moment at the morgue, when in front of only a handful of close kin Jeannette (the last to see Rosie alive) tore the latter's beaded bracelets from her wrists – no *sangoma* is allowed to join the ancestors while still wearing this principal sign of having been elected among the living. Also for us and our children there was the ritual, medicated bath in the thicket near the river to purify us from death. But then the process of social accommodation suddenly ground to a halt. MmaChakayile (emphatically not a *hosanna* but a *sangoma*, a medium whose ancestral spirit delivers articulate messages) was supposed to take over Rosie's patients. However, in the confusion shortly after the funeral junior lodge members and junior relatives made us understand that this takeover would not apply to us. Little did we realise then (while the senior lodge members were still busy with the funeral) that this

¹ Despite the alternative rendering *wosanna*, there is conceivably a link with the biblical exclamation *hōsanna*. Matt 21:9, 15; Mark 11:9-10; John 12:13. The expression only occurs in the Greek of the New Testament, as *hōsanná*, although this is a graecisation of the Hebrew 'O save us', *ho shiya' na*, cf. Ps. 118: 25-26; Strong 1989. This rules out an influence upon the South Central African expression *wosanna* from Old Testament times, but leaves the remote possibility of a Jewish or early Christian (Gnostic?) influence from the beginning of the Common Era, and *a fortiori* the possibility of a modern Christian influence. For remarkable claims concerning comprehensive borrowings from Ancient Judaism in South Central Africa, cf. von Sicard 1952, 1944: 165, 1948: 103. For discussions of an ethnic group in that region apparently retaining fragmented and eroded elements of Ancient Semitic religion, language, food prohibitions, etc., cf. van Warmelo 1966; von Sicard 1952: 140-170; Parfitt 1992. Although notorious for his contentious claims of continuity and communality between cultural and linguistic domains encompassing much of the Old World, von Sicard denies explicitly that there could be an etymological link between the biblical and the South Central African *hosanna*, probably because of the words' uniquely Greek form.

rejection was a mere fabrication on the part of the juniors, who saw us as a threat to their own uncertain statuses at the lodge.

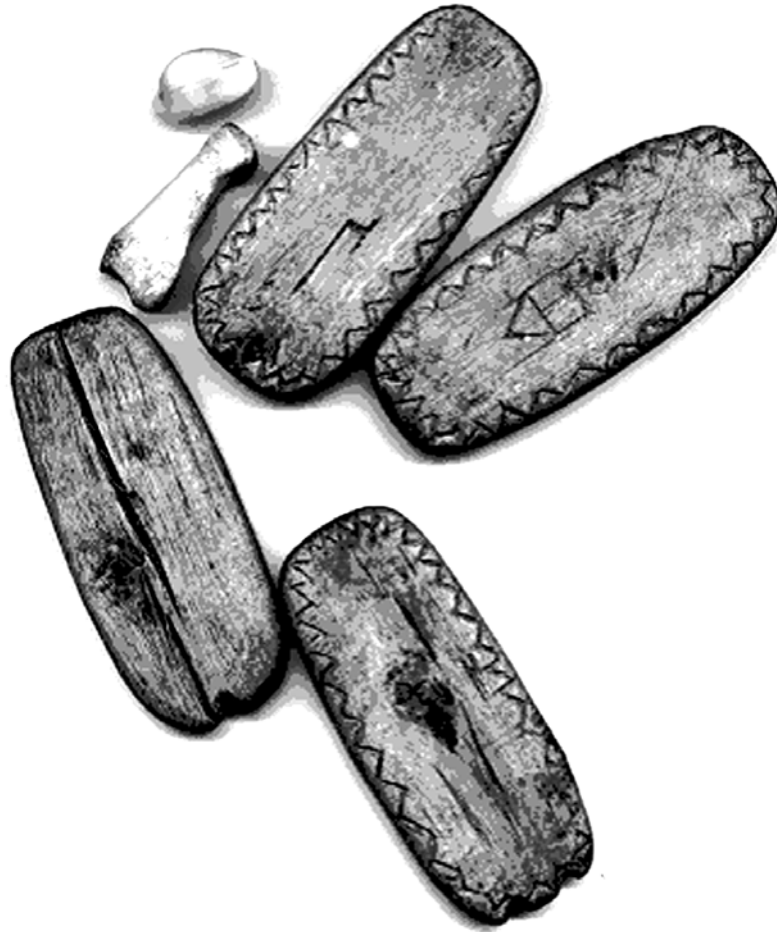


Figure 5.3. The author's divining tablets.

Joshua (whom some blamed for Rosie's death – she died the morning after officiating at his house) suggested, as our only way out, a pilgrimage to the Manyangwa Mwali oracle in Zimbabwe, to which Rosie had been subservient; there surely we would be told how to complete the process of redress we had so hopefully begun under her supervision. However, Joshua's original lodge in Bulawayo could not put us in touch with Manyangwa; instead we got a letter of introduction and an escort of two uniformed *hosannas* to take us to Njelele, another major Mwali oracle in the Matopos Hills. At the shrinekeeper's village, as earlier on in Francistown, we were not welcome. The reason given was that we were White. I objected that we came as distressed suppliants, not as curious outsiders, and that other Whites I knew well (Ranger, Daneel, Werbner, even the South Americanist Huizer) had not been refused there. But the refusal was absolute, and as I was conducting the negotiations adepts in trance aggressively crowded and growled around Patricia who was waiting

at some distance. Leaving behind an eager and disloyal Joshua (who had been granted access) we heartbrokenly drove back to Bulawayo through the night. Only in later years, when I finally did make it to Mwali, did I realise from personal experience how very high the thresholds for first admission to these oracular high-god shrines invariably are. Joshua had taken us on a fool's errand. His later, starry-eyed, account of his nocturnal experience with the Mother of Spirits at Njelele did not quite help us over our own disappointment.

When soon afterwards we moved back to the Netherlands because my allotted year of fieldwork was over, our prevailing feelings were rejection, sadness because of Rosie's death, and failure, for which the mass of my more routinely collected quantitative and administrative data on Francistown society and culture could not compensate. Nine months later, and largely out of loyalty to Rosie's memory, we did stage the required major sacrifice for Patricia's ancestor in her Belgian village – appropriately sighing under the costs, and surprised that her relatives, who turned up in large numbers, had so little of a problem with the whole thing. And this ended the matter as far as Patricia was concerned.

Not so for me. My earlier fieldwork in Tunisia and Zambia and comparative research had prepared me to appreciate *sangomahood* within a wider context, and the experiences at the lodge shed a new light on previously collected data. I had supported Patricia's activities in Rosie's group in every possible way. In the lodge environment such esoteric knowledge as I derived from my Zambian research, a bead necklace and a *Conus* shell pendant reminiscent of that period, and the skills in handling the oracular tablets that Gumede had meanwhile taught me, were recognised as manifestations of a kindred spirit. Rosie's regular adepts would practice divination on virgin dummy tablets. She had given me a set of my own (which I then understood to have been consecrated previously; however, when two years later these tablets were finally consecrated in the blood of my animal sacrifices, I realised that I had been mistaken as to their previously consecrated nature – they had been dummies all along, even though they had allowed me to conduct apparently valid and reliable feats of divination with them.) Rosie also had supervised my further training in the use of these tablets. What with her uniform, daily administrations of medicine, payment of a substantial entrance fee and having been ritually chased across the Maipaahela river, leaving a trail of sacrificial coins behind her, Patricia clearly stood out as a *twaza*, i.e. a trainee *sangoma*. Since I had recently undergone therapy at a rival lodge, that of Sithole, my own status at Maipaahela remained ambiguous: was I a visiting initiate trained in Zambia (I was *not*), or was I merely an obliging husband and sponsor who was allowed to share in the ritual, the training, the day-to-day life and the meals at Rosie's yard? It was only occasionally that I was invited to dance along with the group, although I often shared in the singing and drumming. At the same time I felt a stronger challenge than Patricia did. No doubt there was an element of inter-gender and professional competition, even brutal appropriation, to this, on my part. More important was that I, as a supposedly accomplished fieldworker, had experienced the barriers that

Francistown society put before us not only as emotionally disappointing but also as a shameful professional failure; Patricia, though trained as an Africanist, had no intention to pursue an academic career and therefore was not professionally affected by our exclusion from Francistown African society. I kept hoping that one day, on some later research trip to Francistown, I could realise the opportunities for rapport that were being suggested by our contact with healers and mediums at that stage. If I was not accepted as a temporary member of Francistown African society in my Western-defined role of researcher, I hoped to return in a locally-defined role, within the one urban sector that had, at long last, accommodated us: the sector of traditional healing. And it was in precisely the same direction that the first messages pointed which, only a few days before Rosie's death, I derived from my recently acquired divining tablets (of whose dummy status at that time I was totally unaware): yes, I would return to Francistown; and yes, I would then become a *sangoma*. This was the first divination session I ever conducted by myself, under the guidance of one of Rosie's *twazas* and in the presence of my wife, another *twaza*. In the same session my mother, who had died five years earlier, appeared to give me very precise directions. Shortly before her death she had sewn a dust cover for my pocket calculator to be used during fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau, and now I had to embellish that object with decorative stitching, cowries, imitation pearls, and a button from a knitted sweater my elder sister had worn as a child at the youngest age that I could remember her; the button (not an uncommon item of exchange in the context of Southern African historic religion) had travelled with us to Botswana in Patricia's spare-button box. I was rearranging my Dutch past by reference to symbols picked up during my most wearisome fieldwork ever.

Already considerations in terms of a failing fieldwork strategy were secondary to my longing for esoteric knowledge, symbolic power, and performative beauty. After Tunisia and Zambia, my renewed contact with the ecstatic cult reminded me that the latter was, for me, one of the great achievements of humanity, combining display of self and loss of self, past and present, detachedly applied performative skills and hazardous abandon. I began to think that more than twenty years of African religious research had unknowingly but unmistakably prepared me for the decisive steps I was now about to take. I realised that there would be immense satisfaction for me in having Africans accept me in an African specialist religious role, and I did not mind the respect they would, and ultimately did, accord me in that status – as they do other *sangomas*. But ultimately, when I did come back and did become a *sangoma*, I was to find an even greater reward in the chaste closeness of bodies crammed into MmaChakayile's small lice-infested backroom where *sangomas* would brotherly and sisterly retire after dancing; in the gentle and patient ministrations by which Kwani, at seventeen the youngest of MmaChakayile's *sangoma* granddaughters, tied and retied my sagging ankle rattles; the subtle stage directions, unnoticeable to the lay onlookers, by which the stepping forth and falling back of pairs of *sangomas* on the dancing ground is orchestrated, lest one dancer should steal the show at the expense of the others; and the certainty – or so I thought – of being accepted and supported

when, in the corner of one's eye, one sees the other *sangomas* rallying around from the back, ready to catch one's fall and thus taking away the last impediments to trance. I was seeking existential transformation, fulfilment and redress, much more than anthropological data, across cultural, geographical and boundaries.

An opportunity for renewed contact with MmaChakayile presented itself in August 1990, when I was to give a seminar before the Francistown Town Council on the more down-to-earth aspects of my urban research. Checking on our former neighbours in Somerset East Extension, it turned out that the investments made during the first frustrating year had unexpectedly borne fruit, and I was received back into a very different neighbourhood from what I had left – now there was sociability, small talk, concern, joking, even food for me. A neighbour who the previous year had never bothered to pay us any attention, within a day had arranged the desired contact with the Mwali high priest of the cult's south-west region (i.e. north-east Botswana), and I became an occasional but welcome visitor to his Francistown villa. How would the *sangomas*, whom I had left in the confusion after Rosie's funeral, receive me after a year? With trepidation I called at MmaChakayile's lodge, but immediately I was claimed by the lodge community, and found my proper place there. I was to be MmaChakayile's *twaza* – but even more: she welcomed me back as Johannes, her deceased elder brother. We had to go to Johannes's family plot in the village of Matshelagabedi, an hour's drive outside Francistown; there I was officially introduced to the chief (in Botswana a formal state official) under my identity of *Johannes returned*, following which I had the uncanny experience of being shown my own, i.e. Johannes's, grave just outside the family compound.

Within ten days after renewed contact, the Tunisia-acquired ecstatic techniques enabled me to produce, at that same homestead, the convincing trance that counted as an infallible sign of ancestral election. It was one of the few occasions that MmaChakayile would dance herself, which she did to a beaming ecstasy. Her spirit then took his leave while the medium danced to the tune of a song fitting the occasion, in a mixture of Ndebele and Kalanga (the former being the lodge's main language, the latter MmaChakayile's own mother tongue):

<i>Salā-, salāni</i>	'Stay, stay
<i>Salāni madōda nokutūra</i>	Stay behind brothers, I am leaving
<i>Ndoyè-, ndoyènda</i>	I am going, going,
<i>Ndoyènda madōda sesegámba¹</i>	going brothers, I take my leave.'

Whenever I would witness the *sangomas* dance, in my perception their outside characteristics gave way to supreme grace and beauty. Nancy, MmaChakayile's granddaughter, who despite her youth was herself already a great *sangoma*, was transformed from an overweight vulgar young woman peddling soft drugs, to an

¹ In *sesegámba*, -g- is pronounced -kh-.

alluring goddess promising not earthly but the highest spiritual fulfilment.¹ The same thing happened now, and instead of the ugly, skinny, drunk woman around seventy that MmaChakayile was then, all I saw was a heavenly mother, saturated with beauty, and ready to receive me as her child. I rose from where I was squatting against the wall, and danced towards here. Apparently the regressive conditions of my social, cultural and linguistic isolation at the Matshelagabedi lodge, coupled to drumming and singing, and the never greater promise of imminent fulfilment, unlocked a subconscious infantile conflict of anguished separation and desire to reunite with the mother: a Lacanian² conflict that, as I was only much later to realise, has dominated all my life. So for the second time in my life I fell into trance, and this time all the way.

Among the *sangomas*, whoever enters into trance is supposed to lose consciousness totally. However, in all frankness I remember, from this occasion and all others that were to follow, both my being consciously present in my performance and ancestral utterances, and the astonishing fact that these came effortlessly and as a matter of course, as if they did originate fully-fledged outside myself. According to the eye-witness account that I was given after coming to from my trance, a grand uncle had spoken in Afrikaans through my mouth. One of the *sangomas*, MmaDlozi, was South African and spoke excellent Afrikaans in addition to her mother tongue Sotho. I learned this highly marked variant of my native Dutch language in Zambia in the early 1970s, but I speak it very poorly. On second thoughts the episode was excessively ironical: however much I hoped to be liberated from my imposed stereotypical identity as an Boer in Francistown, and however much ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ was my last resort in fulfilling this hope, my endeavours were in fact legitimated by an ancestral spirit which all present could only identify as a Boer! My ancestor was old and tired and, like all such ancestors who come thorough in mediumistic trance in *sangoma* contexts, he asked for drink and food – in his case maize porridge. Was it the very maize porridge that I resented having been denied while in Francistown?

This was the decisive sign of my calling, and a week later – one day after my appointment to a professorial chair in anthropology at the Free University, Amsterdam, came into effect – I was initiated as a *twaza*, before a massive audience of lodge members, MmaChakayile’s invitees and neighbours, and with all the trappings: my own *sangoma* uniform as dictated in detail by my ancestral spirit under trance; sacred cloths, as well as bead necklaces and bracelets that I was to wear night and day for the rest of my life; elaborate and cumbersome taboos and prescriptions relating to food, body care, sexuality and ritual for the duration of my period as a *twaza*; and (irregularly premature, but very explicitly) the right to practice traditional medicine.

¹ The name ‘Nancy’ is a pseudonym.

² Lacan 1993.

Great as the fulfilment was, I was under enormous tension and, with the classic novice's syndrome, passed the night before initiation fearing it would be my last. I dreamt that I was in the overwhelming, numinous, but invisible presence of God, who in a thunderous male¹ voice told me

'I am Mwali, and I am calling you.'

One of our few White friends in Francistown, our family doctor, had warned me severely: not having grown up in Southern Africa, I could not possibly know what I was dabbling in, for suggestion and hypnosis were the *sangomas'* stock-in-trade, and the least I was asking for was being turned into a zombie for life; or was I courting Rosie's tragic fate? On the day of the initiation I took my research assistant Ms Ennie Maphakwane along as my witness, although it was her first visit to the lodge. And for further protection I went to the extent of collecting from the other end of town MmaMpofu, a motherly lady whom we had met and lost sight of in 1988 and whom only two years later I had found out to have been Rosie's senior adept. Massive ceremonies in South Central and Southern Africa always require loads of firewood, both for cooking and for sociably sitting around the fire at night, so on our way to my *twaza* entry ceremony we went to pick up additional firewood at the house of one of MmaMpofu's in-laws. This relative happened to be a Zionist² church leader, and I asked him to pray with us for protection and blessing; fully aware of MmaMpofu's non-Christian ritual status, he yet obliged graciously, and far from charging for the firewood, brought it along to MmaChakayile's yard in his own truck.

All my precautions proved unnecessary. The ceremony included the standard ritual of 'anti-cooking', in which a solution of the pounded *mpetlelwe* root is battered in a cup placed on the novice's head until a light foam is produced – the foam is subsequently applied to the patient's temples and the joints of his extremities. Moreover, I had to join the other *sangomas* in drinking blood from the cut throat of my dying sacrificial goat; its gall was smeared onto my feet and its inflated gall bladder tied to a string for me to wear as a pendant. The ceremony was entirely public, out in the open yard. At no point was I to eat or drink anything that was not shared with others. The main language at the lodge is Ndebele, and most of its members are 'paper' Batswana³ from Zimbabwe, but to my relief it turned out that I

¹ By unexplained contrast to the androgynous or female connotations Mwali assumes elsewhere in this chapter.

² In Southern Africa, Zionist churches are a variety of Christian religious organisations characterised by church uniforms, flags, prophetism, music and dance as part of the regular worship, seizure by the Holy Spirit, and the prominence of an imagery focused on a legendary or real Mt Zion. Except through Biblical symbolism, there is no direct connection with Zionism as a Jewish moment advocating the *reconquista* of Palestine since the end of the nineteenth century CE. Cf. Schoffeleers 1991b; Comaroff 1985; van Binsbergen 1993b; Daneel 1970b; Werbner 1985; Sundkler 1976; Fogelqvist 1988; Kiernan 1988; Oosthuizen 1968, 1986; Oosthuizen *et al.* 1989.

³ In the Tswana language, *Batswana* is the personal plural form of the adjective *-tswana*, i.e. 'people of Tswana identity'. The singular form is *Motswana*. The form *Botswana* denotes 'the land of Tswana', and

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was to be initiated along with a woman nearly my own age, MmaNleya, whose father and husband had come from western Zambia and with whom I could speak Nkoya – she answering back in the related Luvale language. To humour my White spirit, MmaChakayile had with considerable inventiveness engaged in *bricolage*, and thus from her large stock of paraphernalia European hats were produced for her and me to wear during the ceremony; the goat's meat was to be not cooked but barbecued (for Southern African 'Whites like their *braai*', as MmaChakayile explained), and the fried meat was displayed not on the ground but (Whiteman's fashion) on a table. In single file the lodge population followed MmaChakayile and me in a procession that led back and forth, over my sacred white cloth that was extended between the lodge's arboreal shrine and that table, and in passing everyone would take a single piece of the meat. Scores, later hundreds, of people from the surrounding Monarch compound flocked to the yard, cheering, ululating – especially when a triumphant MmaChakayile cried out to describe one by one the parts of my uniform, showing them to the audience:

'these are the trousers of my son', 'this is the shirt of my son'

– and partaking in the free meal that was to follow. The situation became decidedly hilarious when an army jeep drove up from the barracks at the other side of Nyangabgwe Hill: boys who had seen me seated shirtless in the shrine with the foam cooking all over me, had rushed to the military because

'at MmaChakayile's they were flogging a White man to death';

for the only occasion they had seen a man take off his shirt at a public meeting was when corporal punishment was meted out at the customary court. It had been more than half a century since a White man had received that relatively mild punishment in Botswana.¹ The boys did have a point, though; I shall come back to this.

When we retired to MmaChakayile's house in the late afternoon, the tension was released and I had a long crying fit. MmaNleya came up to me and comforted me:

'Does it hurt so much, my brother?'

The emergence of an ancestor in a living person is considered similar to giving birth, and is often a very painful process, not only mentally but also physically. Especially to MmaDlozi, who had interpreted my visiting spirit's Afrikaans for the other lodge members, my reaction was only too obvious: had my 'grandfather' not cried for a (wooden) gun to be added to my uniform, when he spoke through me only an hour ago during my second trance? On the basis of my conscious memories from my first *sangoma* trance I could remember nothing of the sort, so either my memory is partial

Setswana: 'the Tswana language and/or way of life'. These words have also gained currency in Southern African English. The pejorative expression '*paper* Batswana', endemic in Botswana English, refers to people who have acquired the constitutional status of Botswana citizenship, without being Tswana by ethnic identity, language and culture.

¹ Crowder 1988.

and I did not consciously monitor the whole episode after all, or I must assume that on this point MmaDlozi was simply projecting a readily available interpretational scheme onto the incompletely understood mediumistic utterances of my incarnating spirit. A week before I had made my first trip ever to South Africa (making sure to visit Jack Simons and Ray Alexander before they died) and, having seen it a few times on television, had there witnessed my first live performance of *toytoying* by demonstrating students at the University of the Western Cape. This was the context I associated with brandishing a wooden gun, and while I greatly sympathised with these students, the idea of emulating them in a traditional *sangoma* trance did not particularly appeal to me. The military implications of a gun being added to my *sangoma* outfit never properly registered with me at the time, and not surprisingly, considering my family history which was destructively full of soldiers. Yet chapter 8 will make it clear that my being perceived as a member of a military class by the *sangoma* cult's leadership played an important part throughout my initiation.

But for MmaDlozi all this merely meant that

'die ou doppie ('that old chap') ...'

was getting impatient about his gun; a Boer who claims to have died in the Boer war, cannot just wait patiently until his gun is ready; in Southern Africa the stereotypical, tyrannical Boer can never wait patiently if his stratagems are crossed, and in his anger he makes me, his medium, cry.

There was emphatically no acknowledgement of the profound struggle at personal transformation which, from a North Atlantic analytical point of view, would inevitably be taking place when a successful Dutch intellectual with a traumatic childhood accepts to become a Southern African *sangoma*. The absence of psychologising appears to be one of the strengths of *sangoma* aetiology. In any case, on my next trip to Francistown I brought from the Netherlands as an additional ritual object a wooden gun of my own making, painted black, and duly adorned with strings of glass beads. It was made from inferior furniture board material not resistant to lateral pressure, and when I happened to kneel on it at the beginning of my graduation ritual, saluting at the very entrance to the house where this ritual was to be staged, the gun accidentally broke in three pieces. This was interpreted by my fellow-*sangomas* as a sign that – like the shirt of my personal *sangoma* dress – the colour of my gun had had to be red, not black, after all. Back home I manufactured a replacement, this time of superior, thick plywood. I painted it red, and consecrated it – with the blood of sacrificial chickens – at the same time as the shrine I erected in my backyard in Haarlem, the Netherlands.

MmaDlozi was married to a cousin of MmaChakayile's: Andreas, a *sangoma* who, as a retired labour migrant from South Africa in his late sixties, made a living as a guard at the still almost exclusively White Francistown Club. Andreas needed even fewer words; he clutched me and, with an emphasis that contorted his face and body, managed to bring out:

'Johannes, I – I love you'.

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Since my spirit was henceforth to guide my therapeutic practice by means of dreams and inner voices, MmaChakayile deemed it necessary that on her recommendation I would become a member of the same association of traditional healers she and her senior adepts belonged to: the *Kwame (Legwame) Traditional Association of Botswana*. (Kwame – with its Tswana form Legwame – is the name of the first of the standard four divination tablets, ‘the senior woman’.) In case I might ‘lose’ a patient, or would need to carry medicine including game trophies across the national borders, this guild would protect me before the Botswana government, by which it had been recognised. Long ago it had been founded by a herbalist of, again, Zambian origin: Mr G.R. Sinombe, who was still its president. For a few years Gumedede had been its treasurer and general secretary, but he had stepped down during a period that in the association’s file at the Botswana Registrar of Societies’ office (where I had consulted it earlier as a matter of routine, unaware that I would ever join) had stood out as one of financial crisis.

Meanwhile Sinombe had settled in Nata, in the centre of the northern Botswana region that his association covers. It was thither that I travelled three days after my initiation into *twazahood*, in a rented car, along with Nancy, Nancy’s husband Tapson – a Zambian and a renegade *twaza*; our guide was twenty-year-old Jane, one of Sinombe’s eighteen children, and a fellow-student of Ennie, while Ennie herself had to remain behind in Francistown in order to attend her typing class.

The previous night Ennie and I had visited Jane to ask her where we could find her father. It turned out that he had left for the town of Selebi-Phikwe, in order to sell the bar that his ex-wife, Jane’s mother, had built over the years. Jane had bitterly objected to this transaction – the court had assigned this property to the children from the dissolved marriage. At the same time Jane admitted that she had nothing to complain about. Her father supported her, paid her typing lessons, provided for the two children (aged six – for a twenty-year old mother! – and two) who had kept Jane from educational achievement despite her considerable intelligence, rented a spacious room for her in a nice house in a Francistown suburb, and had supplied her with the expensive bed and spring mattress, with a gas stove, and a wardrobe full of clothes.

‘My husband? That is my father. He is the one who looks after me.’

Her father had not been angry at all when she had those children; he had merely told her to go back to school after a year, and this she had done. She was not interested in her father’s work as a leading healer and land priest, considered it boring, and preferred to play cassettes with funk music on her new cassette recorder – the only consumer item she had not got from her father but from a boyfriend, whom she hoped to marry one day. Not unusual in Botswana girls’ rooms, colour pictures of beautiful women in various stages of undress were pasted above her bed, and likewise cut from a glossy magazine there was the headline

‘ME IS ALL I CAN BE’

– endearing and slightly ironic in a town where the alienating imitation of South African imported styles of dress, hairdo, speech, recreation and consumption – which Jane herself seemed to have eagerly adopted – had been the only form of local culture that I had been allowed free access to; at the same time the proud but cliché-like adage with its phoney claims of sincerity and authenticity amounted to just another version of such imitation. Jane was already in bed, a friend and Ennie sat on the edge, and I leisurely occupied the only chair. I brought out my divination tablets and challenged Jane to throw them so that we could see how serious she was in rejecting the profession of her famous father. And although at her Nata homestead she must have met virtually all prominent healers from the region and witnessed many divination sessions at close range, she let the tablets bluntly drop onto the concrete floor as if totally ignorant of the proper way of handling them. They bounced off in all directions.¹ Diviners tend to make idiosyncratic additions to the standard set of four tablets, and one of my own peripherals is a cowry, a cherished religious object in Southern Africa; a giggling Jane called the attention of her friends to its resembling the human vulva. After I had shown her how to cast the tablets in a more respectful manner, the combinations that formed confirmed what she had said: she was destined not to follow in her father’s footsteps but to have a leading role in an office, a company.

‘Ennie tells me that you are interested in Ngwali. Well, you can ask whatever you want, I know all about it. My father has a “Hill”, a Ngwali shrine just outside our yard in Nata, and of all houses in the yard mine is closest to the shrine, so I have heard and seen everything that takes place there. Sometimes people come to consult the oracle; then my father has an assistant and perhaps that one, or my father, produces the voice of Ngwali.’

Thus to my surprise urban Jane suddenly turned out to be a Maiden (of sorts) of Mwali, such as the ones who in the past carried the pots with beer and accompanied the black bull to the shrine on the Hill, where they would dance and request rain; but now the Maiden of Mwali was a trainee typist, holding court in a chaste nightdress in a high concrete-walled room full of funk music, and apparently slighting the Voice! And that after an entire year during which the whole of Francistown had refused to say another word as soon as I shifted the conversation to Mwali.

‘My father tells me that Ngwali has always been there, that she is older than God. But surely that is impossible?’

‘Not necessarily. Look in the Bible, don’t you have one here?’

Like many Francistown girls, she had a Bible sitting on her bedside closet, and I opened it at the Gospel of John; of course, in the hands of me as Johannes, it could not have been any other Gospel.

‘Here, don’t you see. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Mwali is that Word. Perhaps you must look at it this way: before you can exist *as God*, the principle of *existing* must have established itself. That first existence, that makes

¹ Actually, a year later Jane turned out to consult *sangoma* divination on her own impetus, cf. van Binsbergen 1999f.

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everything else possible, that is the meaning of *Mwa-li*, literally.’

Actually I was far from sure of these extemporised linguistic constructs around the root *le*, which in Zambian languages occurs with the meaning of ‘creating’, ‘making’. What about Kalanga, or Tswana, where the root *li* (in Tswana orthography ‘e’ is often pronounced *ee*) has primarily to do with ‘being’? From what nominal class, if any, did the prefix *Mwa-* derive? And what reason did I have for assuming that the name of Mwali obeyed a local syntax, and did not have a very distant origin in a fundamentally different linguistic context? Some aspects of the ritual and the beliefs of the Mwali cult did remind me of the Kali cult of the Terrible Great Mother in South Asia, and this suggestion was yet to be borne out in unexpected ways.¹

To lend force to my (shaky) etymological explanation I made the high-pitched cooing sound (like a tape recorder reproducing human speech at manifold-increased speed) that priests of a major cult of the land in Guinea-Bissau, five thousand kilometres of African continent away but still in the Niger-Congo speaking domain, let pass as the voice of their god, Mama Jombo. I still owed that god two pigs for the birth of my son Vincent. Jane is surprised by the sounds I make.

‘Have you then been to Mwali already? How do you know that Voice?’²

No, I had not yet been to Mwali, at least, when I went there in distress I was rejected. I was exhausted after weeks of preparation and the initiation itself; after the interminable nocturnal dance sessions at MmaChakayile’s, stamping and scraping the rough soil with my bare feet; after the insomnia and nocturnal agitation alternated with vivid dreams that invariably revolved around *sangomas* and the presence of Mwali; after my raids on the shops and banks of Francistown and through the villages in the region in order to procure the many requisites for the initiation (the prescribed clothes, cloth, beads, a goat, firewood, beef, rice, meal and other food, a considerable sum of money, and a smaller sum in specified coins) in so short a time; and in between a trip to the capital in order to complete my general data on Francistown. And the following afternoon I found myself sitting on Jane’s one chair (or is it Jane’s sister’s?), in their one-room white house at Sinombe’s homestead in Nata, and I listened to Jane’s stories while she cooked porridge for me and for Nancy and Tapson whom we could see outside through the open door, sitting under a tree and getting drunk on the cans of beer I had bought for them.

The little house is round and through the window lined with a neat steel frame I can make out, at a distance of fifty metres, a small thatched structure – the Mwali of Nata, unimpressive as compared to the rocks and caves I had hoped to see at Njelele,

¹ Cf. chapter 8; and van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

² In fact, Jane seems to have been mistaken; the Voice commonly heard at the Nata oracle is that of a cunning old man, sneering and cackling, but manifestly comprehensible to those familiar with the Humbe dialect of Shona. The West African oracle of Mama Jombo does not produce comprehensible human speech and requires interpretation by the priests. Cf. Crowley 1990; van Binsbergen 1984b, 1988b.

but deceptively close; it would still take me another year to be allowed inside. Jane had resolutely declined my offer to go and buy chicken-and-chips at the filling station, one kilometre down the road; instead we bought some meat from her father's butchery (Botswana religious leaders tend to diversify their enterprises) and now she is cooking a meal for us on just such a gas stove as she has in Francistown. It is three o'clock in the afternoon, and in two hours' time the bus will arrive with her father, in his pockets the money from the sale of the bar. Jane wears an absurdly smart dress from a South African mail-order catalogue, but she has wrapped an African cloth over it. I myself am overdressed too in this village environment, with my jacket and tie, for I have come to collect my second doctoral degree eleven years after the first. Jane has shown me her photo albums, and the uniform of her sister who is a *sangoma* like me and who turns out to have the same sacred cloths – but she is no longer active in the field. Jane tells me about the annual conventions of the healers' association, when she and her sister have to cook for scores of members who fill the place with their discussions and ritual dances. She tells me about her two children, whom she gave birth to all by herself, without the slightest effort or fear. She breast-fed them herself, and she had plenty of milk, however small her breasts are at other times, she says; and while stirring the porridge with one hand she proudly taps her inconspicuous bosom with the other. The night before, when reaching for the tablets that had leapt away, she had bent so far out of the bed that her nightdress could no longer hide her breasts, and the recollection makes me smile. She is sweet, but I do not fancy her nor she me. Something else is the matter:

'I am very strong. All things of life go well with me. I can live in town or in the village, wear a dress or a wrapped cloth, it makes no difference. I am who I am. I am Ngwali. My children are healthy and I shall have plenty more. This goes back to my grandmother. She was my mother's mother, but when my father thinks of her he still has to cry, he loved her that much. Even though he divorced my mother. *MmaBotshelo*¹ she was called, "Mother of Life". She died a few years ago when she was already very old. And last year we had a ceremony in the family; then I received that name. Since then I have been Mother of Life, and I feel it in everything I do.'

Tears fill my eyes. After a year's struggle in the Francistonian desert of commodified mass culture, it had yet to be in Botswana that, in ecstatic trance, I had come to be fused with the symbols of Africa more than anywhere else before; and now the Mother of Life, disguised as a funk-loving young trainee typist, has led me to the Mother of Spirits, to Mwali. Awaiting the arrival of the priest, her father, she prepares food for me. Does this mean that the shattering events of the last few weeks, the whole process of my initiation to *twazahood* in which only the previous night Jane had assumed an overt role, had been nothing but a strategy on her part, aimed at arranging another meeting with me? The Mother of Life: I had met her a few times earlier on the crossroads of my life – for instance, in her disguise as Najma bint Hassuna – and, like now, I had admired her without being aroused by

¹ The *h* is mute and does not combine with the preceding *s* into *sh*.

her. My children were named after her. My poetry is about her. My scholarly and literary writing is a longing for her, an attempt to fulfil the mission she entrusted me with and find mercy in her eyes.

‘Frankly speaking, I am not interested to be just a typist. You know what I really want to do? To write! I want to be an author. I would start by writing a book about the life of my parents, and how one experiences that as a child and how it makes one suffer. If this is what one wants it would help, I think, if one is good at typing. For my brother’s wedding I wrote a long poem and recited it in front of the people. My father was so impressed that he gave me a hundred Pula¹ on the spot.’

Many people in Francistown have to work a month for that kind of money.

My own life as a writer had started, too, with the desire to put the sorrow of my childhood on record; and somewhat earlier, as a thirteen year old, I had taught myself how to type when, after years of daydreaming about distant millionaires who in response to my touching letter would send me a typewriter, I was given a second-hand typewriter by my mother, in fulfilment of my only material wish. And now, thirty years and ten thousand pages later, I had arrived at a point where I was prepared to trade – perhaps for ever – my status of writer for that of *sangoma*, to unite – not in lasting printed words but in bodily rhythms and public displays of an elaborate uniform, of dancing and trance that will fade without a record – with the symbols I have been chasing all my adult life, acquiring an African status that in my own society can only be considered a case of madness induced by extended expatriate life in the tropics. Jane, however, who had received as a birthright that which I was yearning for, was groping for the only type of transformation – notably: literary encoding – that would allow her to assert her identity into the modern world she belonged to just as much as she belonged to the old world.

‘By all means, Jane, write. I myself have published a pile of books. I shall help you to publish yours.’

In the beginning was the Word.

As if to celebrate her alchemistic fusion of the old and the new, the village and the town, the earthly and the celestial, Jane Sinombe takes a sachet of *Knorr* freeze-dried curry soup from a shelf, tears it open and sprinkles the powder onto the gravy in which the beef is simmering. Now this traditional meal will never again taste like it did, only last year in my Zambian village, without the packaged flavouring. It tastes better, and makes one want a second helping. And I am grateful that Jane fills the plates for Nancy and Tapson and serves them outside, so that just the two of us, inside, can cherish this sacred shared moment outside time a bit longer. I am eating together with the Mother of Life.

After the meal there is nothing more to be said, and we step outside to join the tipsy couple, in the cool of the late afternoon. Soon we hear a bus pull up on the tar road, a hundred metres away. A tall, vigorous man beyond middle age enters the

¹ The Botswana currency, Pula P1 roughly equivalent to Euro €0.30 by the 1990 price level.

yard, in his trail a few subordinates who carry all sorts of luggage. Like any minister of religion or land priest in Botswana, Sinombe is dressed in plain black, but with a surprising twist: a hunter's hat with feathers, knickerbockers and a short leather coat. He has a protruding stomach, and a round face with the largest cheeks I have ever seen except in brass wind musicians whilst performing. After a brief stop at the main house he crosses the spacious yard towards us. Jane ostentatiously ignores her father's arrival; she pushes a Tswana hymn book into my hands, and together we start singing *Rock of Ages* in that language. Is it then God we are welcoming? Or Tom Bombadil, after all?¹ We are halfway through a second hymn when Sinombe addresses us playfully in flawless English.

'Good afternoon. I must say this for you: at least you can sing. I bet you were not expecting somebody like me in this place, were you?'

On the collar of his coat I see the golden letters DOUANE – CUSTOMS; he controls a Southern African boundary – the boundary no doubt between the White-dominated public sphere and the now underground domain of African tradition. Nancy follows him inside the house and makes her report. With such recommendation, who needs another formal examination; becoming a *sangoma* means, among other things, that specialists are prepared to stake their reputation in testimony of the novice's accomplishment, in a very real parallel with worldwide academic procedure. A quarter of an hour later I am a somewhat prematurely registered African doctor, with a certificate to frame and hang on the wall, and a licence to carry with me, complete with photograph and rubber stamp. There is no formal congratulatory speech but I feel as triumphant as when I obtained my first doctorate out of the hands of Matthew Schoffeleers. Sinombe's book of receipts turns out to be finished, but he borrows a page from mine (after all, I am still a fieldworker expected to claim and account for research expenses in far-away places) and on it graciously acknowledges the registration fee of thirty-five Pula.

The previous day I had prepared for this visit by means of a long conversation with a cousin of Gumede's, a prominent politician in Francistown.

'Ask him for protective medicine, *inyatola*, for you will need that now,'

my friend had told me. And so I did, adding a passing reference to Gumede – I might find out more about the conflict that had made him leave the association. Sinombe scarcely rose to the bait, insisted however that he had

'raised those boys [both Gumede and the cousin], back in Bulawayo,'

and that he was not dead yet. Then he showed me to a nearby open spot in the forest; laid out on an unsheltered table, and suspended from the branches of a large tree,

¹ Tolkien 1990. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tom Bombadil is a fairy-tale 'master of animals' (cf. Chittenden 1947; Burkert 1979), a kind of nature god, living in the seclusion of the forest and keeping aloof from human affairs, benevolent to the point of silliness yet capable of unleashing the entire crushing force of nature if provoked.

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were the medicines. Seeing the vegetal medicine thus spread out in the forest, I was strongly reminded of the biblical passage that was used on a motto in the Constitution of Sinombe's association of traditional healers, which I had read only a few days previously in the Registrar of Societies' files in Gaborone:

'And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.'¹

Proudly Sinombe drew my attention to an elaborate bead headdress of the Shumba cult – another loose end in my research beginning to fall into place today; the paraphernalia had belonged to MmaBotshelo but he kept it here, in a spot where Jane, as she later told me, had never been allowed to go.

'Nothing is ever missing from my stock,' Sinombe said. 'I do not employ guards, but I have my own guards to protect this place',

implying that he had domesticated the Lion cult's formidable spirits to look after his table full of medicine, exposed out in the open woods. He selected two types of arboreal medicine, cut of each type a piece that would fit in the palm of a hand, dropped the pieces onto the soil and made me pick them up. They would protect me, Sinombe explained, not so much (as I had expected) in a context of intra-cultic rivalry at the lodge, but from my fellow-Europeans, when these would see me embrace what they would denigrate as 'kaffir things'.

'That will be another ten Pula.'

Perhaps some other time, he explained, at the instigation of MmaChakayile, he could take me to his Mwali shrine. I was however invited to attend the professional association's Annual General Meeting, due to take place the next weekend.

The next morning, back in Francistown, I reported to Gumede at his consultation room in the Somerset East compound, under the very smoke of the large new Nyangabgwe Hospital. I proudly showed him my licence. My master had long since joined a rival professional organisation, and chose to be dismissive: the licence was a useless piece of paper, and Sinombe was finished anyway, a dead man; but I could see he was immensely pleased. Five clients were waiting under the shelter next to the surgery.

'Anyway, why don't you help me attending to them. I am too busy, must start cooking my fat cakes.'

Ostentatiously he called me Dr Sibanda in front of his patients; *Sibanda* ('Predator') was the clan name his cousin had divined for me a few days earlier. With the first patients I only helped to fetch and unscrew glass jars with medicine, scrape roots into powder, and give second opinions on the fall of the divination tablets; the last patient I was allowed to treat all by myself. We shared that morning's takings. He

¹ Rev. 22.

sent me on my way with yet more protective medicine his cousin had told me to ask from him, in addition to what Sinombe would give me. As he would say to me in 1992, shortly before his death, when in his turn he had become my patient, faithfully and serenely following the ritual instructions I had given him:

‘You may show them what is on top in your traditional healer’s bag; but never what is at the bottom.’

As I am rewriting this chapter for the umpteenth time, realising that underneath every layer of integrity another layer of performativity becomes noticeable, I keep wondering whether I am now following his advice, or not.

Ten months later, in 1991, finalising this chapter for its initial publication as an article in the *Journal of Religion in Africa*, I spent another month at the Monarch lodge. I was welcomed back as a *twaza*, and after reporting on my spiritual progress (dreams, ritual observances) since my departure in 1990, I was given additional paraphernalia including Nancy’s great gift, a necklace consisting of a python’s full set of vertebrae; the python is a central symbol in the *sangoma* cult, many *sangomas* adorning one wall of their surgery with a python skin extended full-length. Elsewhere in Francistown I started a modest practice as a diviner and healer, giving in to insistent popular demand. With Kwani and others I roamed the forest around Matshelagabedi for a few days, learning to recognise and dig up the major *sangoma* medicines. I had my *twaza* infant hair ritually cut, and was flogged across the river, like Patricia two years earlier (dropping coins to placate the Great Water Serpent, who is the *sangoma*’s ally but also his doom). I was once again examined on my dexterity in divination. And after these preparations I was pronounced ready to come out as a *sangoma*. I was to supply three more goats. I killed one of them and MmaChakayile and I had to drink its blood from one and the same bowl. My divination ‘bones’ (in fact, wooden tablets) were washed in the remainder of the blood, I underwent a repetition of last year’s gall ritual, and for the first time in a year I was allowed to eat ‘inside meat’ (heart, liver, intestines) again – although, contrary to my local friends’ tastes, this was never my favourite dish and I had not resented its temporary cancellation from my menu. The well-attended ceremony took place in Matshelagabedi, where Nancy’s and Kwani’s mother (herself a major *sangoma*) had brewed the ancestral sorghum beer. Part of the ceremony consisted of repeated and elaborate libations and prayers at the village’s ancestral shrines, in which to my alarm I was to be a major officiant. It turned out to be a *sangoma*’s final coming-out ceremony but also my public installation as Johannes-reborn. What the latter entails in terms of a lifelong commitment to, and responsibility for, MmaChakayile’s large family now dispersed over two villages and two urban compounds, I had not yet the courage to work out. Next year we were to travel to Zimbabwe in order, finally, to make the pilgrimage to Mwali at Njelele, and to visit Johannes’s surviving cousins and nieces.

After paying MmaChakayile the huge fee (I found it to be suddenly raised by 100% at the instigation of Jeannette; however, MmaChakayile did help me pay a

substantial part of the expenses of the coming-out party and threw in a black bull and a sheep of her own, sacrificed on my behalf), the time had come for her to take me to Mwali, for my definitive empowering as a healer. She would have preferred to go to the major shrines in the Matopos Hills, but since there were only a few days left before my scheduled return home, and since she had no passport with which to enter Zimbabwe in the legally prescribed way (the *sangomas* and many other Kalanga and Ndebele have other ways of crossing the international boundary between Botswana and Zimbabwe, but that was deemed too dangerous for me with my conspicuous White face) she settled once again for Nata. This time, even Nancy was not senior enough for the assignment, and I travelled with MmaChakayile, her sister MmaTedi, the professional association's Vice-President Mr Z. Munayowe¹ from Francistown (another Zambian), and the lodge's most junior *twaza*, whose task it was to wait on MmaChakayile. It was strange to spend another day at Sinombe's compound waiting for the sun to set, watching Jane's sister (who did not know me) go in and out of the familiar round white house, and realising that without Jane present I was reduced to an outsider: that happy personal shrine of our intercultural encounter was closed to me once more and probably forever. In the afternoon Sinombe spent two hours alone with me and told me everything I wanted to know about himself, his life history, and his position in the cult:

'I am not God; I am not Jesus; I am, Mbedzi, "the Saviour"'.²

Still, and despite substantial financial offerings, the threshold to Mwali was not yet to be crossed. Sinombe (carrying a leopard skin on his shoulder), his two female acolytes, followed by MmaChakayile (whom Sinombe earlier that day had informally called 'Chaks', acknowledging their long-standing relationship as close colleagues and also their capacity for drawing on modern, global registers, notably practices of nicknaming in colloquial English) and MmaTedi, the four women covered under cheap white nylon bedsheets, proceeded to the oracle to ask permission for me to enter, and I could just hear the Voice in the distance. When they came back they reported that, while acknowledging me as an accomplished healer, the Voice would only admit me inside the oracle once I returned with a leopard skin on my shoulder: such attire was alleged by Mwali to be the traditional ceremonial dress

'of the kind of people he belongs to';³

it is also a sign of seniority in the idiom of the *sangoma* cult (and as such it was immediately and heatedly contested back at the Monarch lodge). Meanwhile I was to read Psalm 121 twice daily:

¹ A pseudonym. Born in 1921 in Choma, Zambia, as grandson of a rainmaker in Namwala, Ilaland, he was a (classificatory) cousin to Sinombe, and one of the main traditional practitioners in Francistown.

² For discussion of this statement, cf. chapter 8.

³ As previous note.

‘I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help ...’.

Already the next morning I was lucky enough to trace an affordable leopard skin with the Francistown company that had tanned the skins of my three ceremonial goats so far. I returned to Nata, was admitted, and timidly spoke with God.

5.3. Discussion

Why should the preceding section take the form of a narrative, alludingly evoking rather than describing, let alone analysing, phenomena that would be of interest to the detached student of African religion: cultic organisation, symbolism, ritual structure, performance, the flow of cash, grace and power?

One reason is that boundary crossing, as a fieldworker and a human being, into an originally alien religious specialist domain primarily produces knowledge of a kind that is systematically different from the kind of knowledge ethnography is made of. I realise that this is a contentious position. Many anthropologists have crossed similar boundaries through initiation, and have happily used the experience as a data-collection strategy.¹ There is no doubt that ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ offers me as a researcher a vast range of information, both of esoteric knowledge, and of social arrangements and bodily practices that may not be as accessible to the researcher who remains a relative outsider. But, at the same time, the very process of crossing by which that knowledge is gathered, renders the immediate academic processing of that knowledge into mainstream anthropological discourse not so much illegitimate (for I am under no obligation whatsoever to treat my *sangoma* expertise as secret) but irrelevant.

The practical knowledge I claim to have acquired (enough to play the role of a *twaza* novice convincingly and to come out as a fully-fledged *sangoma*), is at the same time more profound and complete, more personal and idiosyncratic, and (as all practical knowledge) more superficial and patchy than that which my learned colleagues have produced over the decades in the way of religious ethnography.

What does it mean that this knowledge is practical? That it can inform social action that, in the appropriate setting for which it is meant, is recognisable, convincing and compelling for other actors, and therefore effective.

One of the central questions that I can now further explore is one that has fascinated me for decades:² *to what extent is mediumship learned, socially patterned behaviour?* Obviously, someone like me who is capable of repeatedly producing an acceptable trance in a culturally alien setting can contribute towards an answer on this point; but such an answer will not be attempted in the present chapter, for it cannot be based on introspection alone, even though such would not be unusual in the study of ecstasy and mysticism. The performance, in trance and in divination, is

¹ Some of the dilemmas arising in this connection are discussed in Fidaali 1987 and Jaulin 1971.

² Cf. van Binsbergen 1972, reprinted in 1981a: chapter 2.

to some extent moulded by institutionalised expectations shared by the fellow-specialists and (at a much less specific and systematic level) by the lay audience. At least as important, however, is the gradual unfolding of new expectations and the invention of new – progressively convincing and acceptable – patterns by the specialist in the course of the performance itself.¹ Here a central role is played by *seduction*: a – culturally specific – communication technique that evokes, on the one hand, boundaries (prohibiting access to symbolically charged bodily zones, but also to specific items of knowledge, action, etc.) and, on the other, a conditional promise to transgress those boundaries. In seduction lies the success of any performer, including the diviner and the shamanistic medium. The prestige and power attaching to these roles only partially derives from the permanently institutionalised social attribution of respect to fixed positions, and largely from the constant flow of interaction, presentation of self, seduction, between specialist, fellow-specialists, and lay audience. Although the performative element in mediumship has been stressed ever since Leiris' work half a century ago,² its reliance on improvisation and non-verbal communication makes it very difficult to penetrate with the aid of established ethnographic methods.

If the religious complex discussed in this chapter can be compared to a language, 'becoming a *sangoma*' means becoming sufficiently proficient in that language to conduct a meaningful if still imperfect conversation with native speakers; alternatively, writing an ethnographic treatise on the *sangoma* complex would amount to producing a generative phonology and syntax of the same language, in a meta-discourse that completely abstracts from concrete speech situations, that is cast in a different, international language, and that would be virtually meaningless to the native speakers. Both forms of outsider appropriation presuppose rather extensive knowledge; but the types of knowledge, and their relevance to both outsider producers and native speakers, are different – and my choice of a narrative rather than a discursive analytical format here is to remind the reader of just that.

In the context of practical knowledge, also, a peculiar feature of the *sangoma* complex needs to be appreciated: the absolute preeminence of ancestral and divine empowerment (charisma) over technical skills. Healing is conceived, in this complex, as the realignment of the natural and the supernatural. Therefore the *sangoma*, with his repeated and publicly recognised ancestral manifestations – as the embodiment of the ancestors in the world of the living – is the healer *par excellence*, in principle *regardless* of the level of his specific technical skills. Of course, the classifications underlying the divination process and the *sangoma* pharmacopoeia, the specific rituals, song texts, drumming rhythms and dance movements, require a considerable amount of specialist knowledge acquisition, and this is what is being examined by the professional associations before they issue the traditional healer's licence. But the scope for improvisation (legitimated by reference to 'dreaming') and

¹ The *praxeological* dimension; cf. van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985b.

² Leiris 1980, first published in the 1950s.

free variation is enormous, and virtually any deviation from accepted practice can be justified by reference to idiosyncratic ancestral revelations. In fact, in the competition for a share of the ritual market, *sangomas* are often driven towards such idiosyncracies. The ultimate test lies always in the spiritual manifestation, and this more than anything else explains the (otherwise incredible) ease and speed with which I, a blundering outsider but with considerable experience in ecstatic religion, could embark on a crash course toward accomplished *sangomahood*. The greatest distortion would be to make the *sangoma* appear as a Southern African psychoanalyst with the equivalent of seven years of academic and clinical training behind her;¹ on the contrary, ecstasy offers a *shortcut to charisma*, and is therefore a literal godsend to those of us who for social–structural reasons (because we are women, or junior siblings, or foreigners, or Whites in a Black environment) have no proper claim to the established *ascriptive* routes to religious authority.

There is meanwhile a more fundamental reason for my reluctance to make ethnography out of the images and experiences I have evoked in a narrative form in the preceding section. This is the issue of humility of the initiand (and of the fieldworker, who is an initiand even if she stays far away from *sangomahood* and the like – as most fieldworkers do) versus the arrogance implied in the penetration of a Faustian rationality.² A comparison with academic approaches to religion in North Atlantic societies may help to bring out what I have in mind. Since the Enlightenment, studies of the empirical aspects of religious phenomena (the observable behaviour they entail, the material objects they involve, the organisation structures that inform them) have developed side by side with theology that, while an academic subject, is more typically a pursuit for ‘believers’. The relationship between these two domains has been very uneasy at times; Wiebe³ in contentious and widely read articles has insisted on the need for greater rigour in their separation, particularly the need to keep empirical studies clear from theological influences. In African religious studies, this echoes the criticism Horton levelled as from the 1970s against the ‘devout opposition’ of Christians (and Muslims), whose personal religious convictions are alleged by Horton to prevent them from being totally objective in their approach to autochthonous African religion and to world religions in contemporary Africa.⁴ Horton’s case is convincing. Now, my feeling is that, in rather similar terms, the expanding community of students of African religion and ritual might be taken to form a kind of ‘devout opposition’ in this respect, that with

¹ A tendency to be found in several of the contributions to Oosthuizen *et al.* 1989.

² Of which, incidentally, my *Religious Change in Zambia* (van Binsbergen 1981a) may well have been one of the worst examples (as Fernandez suspected at an early stage; Fernandez 1978): it is almost entirely based on an outsider, *etic*, perspective and on an approach (neo-Marxist) that has great difficulty accommodating the specificity of social and cultural phenomena in space and time.

³ Wiebe 1984, 1986; cf. Dawson 1986.

⁴ Horton 1975: 394f, and 1984.

the exception perhaps of a few African-born anthropologists and a few exceptional North Atlantic cases like myself, the imposition of alien (albeit not so much Christian but agnostic, reductionist, Marxist, etc.) interpretative projections, from a primarily *etic* perspective, has become a consensual point of departure for scholarly debate on African religion. Much as we may respect African religion, as students of African religion we normally assume that it is within our field of competence to explain it away in sociological, anthropological, economic, etc., terms. '*The African gods do not really exist*' is the *a priori* informing African religious studies today.

Christians, Jews and Muslims can seek refuge in theology and there continue to produce such intellectual commentary on endemic religion as, for the better part of two millennia, has been one of the pillars of European and Middle Eastern intellectual life; incidentally, magic, divination, astrology have formed another such pillar. In turning to theological commentary, these believers' intellectual efforts are not necessarily less relevant and less commanding of respect than the intellectual products of academic students of creative literature: they provide an approach that does not necessarily deconstruct, deny, assault, appropriate, explain away, or destroy the living, creative subject matter of their discipline. Where, then, is the equivalent of theology for the study of African religion? Is it to be found in so-called African Theology?¹ Perhaps, but we have reason to doubt whether, in the latter context, adequate use is made of the massive systematic, theoretical and methodological knowledge empirical students of African religion have built up over the decades. Where is, today, the intellectual refuge where one can ethnographically, hermeneutically, 'comment' on African religion without destroying it?

I refuse to deconstruct my knowledge of *sangomahood* if, in the process, I am professionally compelled to kill its powerful images on the operation table of intellectual vivisection. At the same time, it would be a waste not to ultimately subject this knowledge to the kind of systematic academic commentary I and many of my colleagues have shown ourselves capable of. Can one anthropologically discuss African religion without condescending reductionism? Is there a viable theology of 'animism'?

Back to humility; although doubtless I am not the humblest of persons. I said the boys who interpreted my *twaza* initiation ceremony as a White man being flogged to death had a point. Let me spell out what I meant. To the extent to which the destructively taking-apart (as distinct from hermeneutic, i.e. illuminating intellectual commentary) of African religion has become the accepted stance in our field of scholarship, and to the (largely overlapping) extent to which specifically the African people of Francistown cannot deal with *sangomahood* and related aspects of their symbolic universe without being conscious of its rejection by the dominant White and Christian culture of twentieth-century Southern Africa, to that extent becoming a *sangoma* is an act of atonement, and of deliberate humility.

¹ Cf. Schoffeleers 1988.

The White outsider divests his ‘uniform of colour’ (Hilda Kuper)¹ – that is his protective status as one possessing privileged knowledge and sanctuary on the basis of the history of colonial and capitalist conquest, and instead tries to adopt forms of behaviour stipulated by the local ancestral cult and the cult of the land in which the historic (pre-Christian, pre-Islamic) regional High God is the highest authority.² The *sangoma*’s bead bracelets, never to be removed in one’s lifetime, represent the ancestors’ coagulated semen out of which the human skeleton is formed – but also the shackles of bondage to the lodge, its leader, and to *sangomahood* in general. The *twaza*’s downcast eyes and stooped posture when dancing convey feminine submission. Each exchange of greetings and formal conversation between the *twaza* and senior lodge members, each welcoming of a spirit taking possession of a fellow dancer, and the termination of each sequence of dancing and singing, involve elaborate acts of bodily submission in the form of prostration, kneeling and clapping. It *hurts* to dance for hours barefooted on the African soil and on the rough concrete floors of popular housing, and it produces massive cloven callouses typical of African village women and never found among shod Europeans. It hurts, and it heals.

The initiand is humiliated, as well as glorified. Once allowed in, having progressed from visiting stranger to incorporated *twaza*, he or she occupies the lowest rank at the lodge. I noted this change in my own position with a satisfied chuckle: I had been seduced to enter a rank where I found myself at the beck and call of lodge members young enough to be my daughters.

At the same time there was undeniable glorification in the face of the lay audience, whose respectful enthusiasm was far from lost on me. What did my becoming a *sangoma* mean to them?

Because of its history of a hundred years of mining, migrancy, monopoly capitalism, and land alienation, Francistown and the surrounding Northeast District have been far more subjected to conditions of racialist humiliation than any other

¹ Kuper 1969. Of course, Kuper uses the expression to refer, not to Whites as I do here, but to the conditions of exclusion and exploitation of African colonial subjects in Southern Africa.

² In chapters 7 and 8 below, we will see that we need to qualify somewhat my consciousness-raising appeal to the allegedly *local* nature of the Southern African high god, prior to such expansion of Christianity and Islam in this region as took place in the course of the second millennium CE. We will see that the *sangomas*’ central diagnostic practice, their four-tablet oracle, has unmistakable Islamic roots – something I did not yet realise in 1990-1991, when this chapter was first written. This Islamic background makes it thinkable, at least, that also the high god herself is not totally independent, as a historic concept, from Islam. Von Sicard, a specialist in comparative religion who worked in Zimbabwe for decades, claims extensive parallels between local cults and Judaism (von Sicard 1952, 1944: 165, 1948: 103) – enough for mainstream researchers to classify him as crackpot, although there is further evidence of Semitic influences in Southern Africa (van Warmelo 1966; Parfitt 1992). Moreover, Buddhism and Hinduism from South and East Asia will turn out to have exerted a considerable influence on the *sangoma* religion of Southern Africa. Christian influences on the Lower Zambezi river, not too far from the cultic region of the Mwali cult, go back more than four centuries before present. The apparently self-evident locality that I still parade in the main text at this point is at least in part an uncritical echo of a well-intended but a-historical post-colonial ideology of African autochthony.

part of Botswana.¹ The inroads of mass consumption and the imitation of South African and worldwide patterns of electronically-based mass culture (merely additional aspects of capitalist penetration) also contribute to this. Attachment to the Mwali cult, traditional healing, and ethnic identity, have gone underground and proved extremely hard to bring to the surface.

‘Whites do not eat that sort of thing.’

The word ‘White’ occurs with an irritating frequency in this chapter. Of course, I use this as an ‘emic’ concept found in the societies of Southern Africa. Part of the issue at hand here is the tenet of racialism (the linking of culture with endemic somatic characteristics) *as against* the tenet of the social sciences that all culture is learned, that therefore the boundaries between alien cultures can be crossed (e.g. ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ could serve as an example of such crossing), and that any claimed association between cultural forms and somatic characteristics is fundamentally accidental and immaterial although social scientists should study such claims as socio-cultural constructs peculiar to a certain society. The racist dimension of the rejection which my family experienced in Francistown was all the more shocking since in fieldwork elsewhere in Africa my somatic difference from my participants had not prevented rapport, not even in an urban environment such as Zambia’s capital Lusaka – but there, admittedly, I chose to concentrate on an urban minority, the Nkoya, whose orientation towards their rural homeland created such a high density of intra-group interaction and social control that relations between the researcher and that migrant community were hardly representative for generally prevailing urban relations in Lusaka at the time. Incidentally, that somatic identity with one’s African informants is not necessarily an advantage, is clear from the puzzling experiences of the African anthropologist Yamba.²

In fact our being rejected or ignored by most of our Francistown neighbours sprang not only from the Black–White contradiction, but also from a scientific, methodological error. I had expected that a fieldwork strategy based on locality (notably: participant observation within a neighbourhood) would work here. But in Francistown ‘locality’ (in the structural sense)³ was constructed in a fundamentally different way from the villages and urban wards I had so far studied in Tunisia, Zambia and Guinea-Bissau. In Francistown, locality not only (in a way thoroughly familiar to me from Zambia’s capital Lusaka)⁴ took shape through self-chosen network contacts within the town, contacts that were not dictated in the first place by geographical propinquity, but their peculiarity was that *they offered a refuge for identity gone underground*. It was those contacts that created social niches of sameness, of identity, drawing either on colleagues at work, fellow-drinkers, fellow-

¹ Cf. Schapera 1971; Selolwane 1978; Tapela 1976, 1982; Werbner 1970, 1971.

² Yamba 1985.

³ Cf. Appadurai 1995.

⁴ Van Binsbergen 2000b.

churchgoers, or on the rural, intimate, life of the village, away from the public eye. Initially I had no access whatsoever to these niches, and only gradually did I have some access to Francistown church life and Northeast District village life.

In the Francistown urban context someone who was unmistakably another White man publicly, in front of hundreds of African onlookers, embraced the very cultural forms that, for fear of humiliation, had had to hide from the public domain dominated by White culture. Little wonder that in the next few days the story spread like a bushfire throughout the sixty thousand inhabitants of Francistown. I had it recounted to me several times, while my informants did not realise that it was about myself. These accounts clearly revolved around an element of satisfaction, of restored self-esteem, on the part of the narrators; they engendered a similar sensation in me. The production of academic ethnography is a legitimate and inspiring act of cultural vindication and preservation, but so is casting bones for my African clients and, when the occasion arises, reminding them of their ancestral obligations.

Becoming a *sangoma* is an act of subversion, academically, but certainly socially in the context of Southern African towns. Allowing that process to end in a reappropriation of *sangomahood* by reductionist academic discourse (even when produced by myself) would defeat the whole purpose of the struggle I went through, and would betray my African teachers, colleagues and audiences in what they experienced as symbolic liberation. Let us not be kidding ourselves: however sympathetic and courageous ‘going all the way’ in fieldwork might appear to be, it is not easy to dismiss the radical criticism that all this amounts to just another form of cultural appropriation and subjugation – and even a vicious form. The danger of betrayal is constantly around the corner. Appropriation in itself is not the point. Since nobody (not even the Dalai Lama of Tibet – who is identified as the new incumbent of that office as a small child) is born as an *adult* religious specialist, all acquisition of esoteric specialism (in fieldwork, as in ‘real life’) necessarily involves a degree of appropriation, but the latter has to be redeemed by a commitment to expectations such as exist *within* the religious complex that is being appropriated. This redemption is absent, or is at best only temporary, in the habitual anthropologist’s appropriation and manipulation of ‘data’. Therefore there is no way back: becoming a *sangoma* means the obligation to remain active *as a sangoma*. The point is not whether I believe in the capability of deceased kinsmen to manifest themselves in the empirical world; the point is that, within the context of particular local collective representations, I have made the people sharing those representations believe in me as a carrier of such manifestations, and that I must not fail them. Even if ultimately this may not rule out the possibility of the same sort of enlightened, systematic anthropological commentary that, for instance, allows Roman Catholic priests to write doctorates on the seminary (*i.e.* training institute for the priesthood) as a social system.

One final remark, therefore, on ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ as a strategy of anthropological data acquisition. In anthropological knowledge production two realms of discourse intersect: an external academic one on the one hand, and the

local people's own conscious *emic* conceptualisation (for example their idiom of *sangomahood*) on the other. When prior to returning to Francistown in 1990 I gave a paper¹ at the University of Cape Town, Harriet Ngubane, on the basis of her own extensive rural research in this field,² questioned the (unintended) suggestion that one could *opt* to be a *sangoma*: as she rightly stressed, one has to be chosen by the ancestors, and fascination and desire are not enough. Implied in her point was a question of birthright: why should my wife and I, as European temporary immigrants in Southern Africa, stumble into *sangomahood* whereas she as a Zulu anthropologist, no less keen than we had been, had not been able to pass the test of ancestral election? Was it not more likely that we were merely faking, or – to put it more neutrally – were making more out of an 'exotic' but essentially transient, almost touristic, experience than the experience deserved? I take these points very seriously, and much of the present chapter has been written in implicit reply to them. Whatever the differences (as discussed above) in symbolic emphasis, commercialisation, ascriptive basis, extent of personal *bricolage*, etc., between rural and cosmopolitan *sangomahood*, the fundamental assumption of ancestral choice is the same in both varieties. However, my wife and I did display all the symptoms (the ancestral burden or 'brooding', felt as pain in the back and between the shoulders; the nocturnal agitation; the dreams), and that was one of the reasons why we were accommodated at the Maipaahela lodge. It was suffering, not a taste for sensation – it was a search for community and personal transformation, not for 'data' – that drove us to the lodge. Like my wife, many lodge members never achieve mediumistic trance but that does not in the least prevent them from dancing along in uniform with the other *sangomas* who are accomplished mediums, and with the *hosannas* who fall in rigid trance, saturated with Mwali.

In the last analysis my 'becoming a *sangoma*', in order to be understood, requires a minimum of biographical details, of the sort that philosophers normally skip and that only anthropologists and psychiatrists consider relevant for their professional practice – for the latter's own personality is their main instrument. Autobiographically, 'becoming a *sangoma*' amounts to the most drastic rebuilding of my personality. My mother was an illegitimate child, and searched for her father for sixty years, only to learn towards the end of her life that her father had quietly lived on in a neighbouring country, conscious of her existence, and had only died when she had reached a ripe adult age herself, while she meanwhile experienced miseries that would have worked out far less destructively had her father been present in her life and had he unconditionally accepted her. It was World War I that caused my mother to grow up fatherless (her father had been a Berlin journalist deserting from the German army and finding refuge with my grandmother, in the extreme south of the Netherlands, on neutral territory). The Spanish influenza at the end of that war rendered also my prospective father fatherless as a one-year old. My

¹ Essentially van Binsbergen 1990a.

² E.g. Ngubane [= Sibisi] 1977.

own parents were not to marry either; I was born as an illegitimate child at a time and place when this carried a social stigma (it does no longer in Holland), and in the first two years of my life I officially carried three different surnames in succession. My mother's half-sisters and half-brothers I have only seen once or twice in my life (stigmatised as an illegitimate child, and persisting in the neurotic relationship with my father, she had broken with her family), while I could only regard my paternal relatives as tacit accessories to the sexual and other forms of abuse which my father brought upon our family for many years. The fact that he was my father filled me with terror yet was simply confirmed with every glance I cast in the mirror. For decades my work, my poetry, my life (including my choice to be an anthropologist), were built around the absence, even around my very denial, of ancestors; and around a cramped, one-sided identification, as a man, with exclusively the women in my life. These tendencies expelled me from my culture of origin and made me seek a home elsewhere, in all the places where I conducted fieldwork prior to Francistown. Against this background it is understandable that my Francistown experience of rejection by the local African community landed me in the greatest possible panic. It threw me back upon a stereotypical White somatic identity that I could only derive from my ancestors, through heredity via my father; and from the pain of this identity only local women in the roles of mothers, sisters and daughters – such as Elizabeth, Rosie and Jane – could deliver me. From an ancestor-less piece of flotsam of human history, I became a priest in an ancestral cult, in a decisive step not only of professional independence and Africanist exploration, but also of self-construction.

Now that the study of African religion had become a well-established industry, it is remarkable that so little has been written on what it is to do anthropological fieldwork on religion; and that what little has been written is often of an autobiographical nature.¹ Perhaps this is the one field in anthropology where it is really impossible to maintain the pretence of the researcher as justifiably absent from the finished product of polished academic discourse.

We still know far too little about the anthropological activity as boundary crossing, and how this reacts with the participants' own boundary management. Dealing with other people's existential questions, existential questions of our own cannot be avoided; nor can these all be suffocated under increasingly convoluted and elegant discourse, no matter how many levels of structure, transformation, binary and ternary logic they may contain. In the study of religion, boundaries, while being maintained, are being crossed: in the religious life of the participants, in uncountable ways; in the anthropologist's work, from the fragmented observation of the participants' real life to the finished anthropological account; and in the anthropologist's life, that far from being sealed off by impenetrable boundaries, merges with the lives of his or her hosts in the field, and is uniquely enriched in the process.

¹ Cf. Lobo 1990.

Chapter 5

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:

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- (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 Rahmānīya; 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 fieldwork, 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; Vandebroek 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.

Chapter 6

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.

Chapter 6

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.

The translation of Southern African *sangoma* divination towards a global format, and the validity of the knowledge it produces

7.1. Towards a global format of *sangomahood*

The preceding two chapters have described at length how I became a Southern African diviner-priest (*sangoma*) and how over the years I kept up this identity as a form of risky balancing between African traditional beliefs and my life as a professor and family man in the North Atlantic region. My first report on these developments (chapter 5) ended on a declaration to the effect that I refused to try and analyse what *sangomahood* and its most conspicuous ritual, the divinatory session, amounted to, and what mechanisms informed the latter. More than a decade later I feel I can no longer go on invoking the lessons I derived from *sangomahood* as – among other things – a sustained experiment in interculturality (these lessons form a central theme in the present book), and at the same time treating *sangomahood* itself as a black box. Over the years my identity as a *sangoma* has become sufficiently secure and professional to enable me to attempt the self-reflective, philosophically informed analysis contained in the following pages. A decade ago I thought that my commitment to Africa and to *sangomahood* was best served by claiming for both, on hardly more than emotional grounds, a domain in which they would be safe from hegemonic deconstruction – and where I would be safe with them. Now however I realise that the only way to seriously discharge these commitments, and to reap the benefits of my own enhanced personal and intercultural security and (hopefully) sophistication, is by thinking up a unitary space of meaning, truth and agency in which it is to be possible:

- to think about *sangomahood* in terms that have currency and meaning in the North Atlantic region, and at the same time
- to think about North Atlantic knowledge and belief in terms that have currency

and meaning within *sangomahood*.

To try and discharge this difficult task is the aim of the present chapter.

In my early stages of studying and practising *sangomahood*, both in the Southern African and the North Atlantic context, I translated the basic characteristics of the *sangoma* divination system into a computer program. This exercise did more than force me to make explicit for myself the inner workings of the system. As a form of appropriation and rendering – as faithfully as possible – a local cultural system in a new, alien format, such translation was a form of practical ethnography. And it was a major step towards reformulating the *sangoma* system, originally confined to the cultural and social premises of Southern African society, in such a way that I could present it to a worldwide audience, not so much as an ethnographer does to his fellow anthropologists, but as a practising *sangoma* does to his prospective clients. In the first few years after writing the program, I would merely use it to prepare, a day beforehand, for real-life sessions where my clients would meet me in person, usually at my home, for long face-to-face sessions involving the throwing of real tablets, after a long intercultural explanation. In the second half of the 1990s my being a *sangoma* received considerable coverage in the Dutch and Belgian media, which brought people to contact me by letters and telephone. In late 1998 I began to use the Internet as a means of scientific communication and information, and within a few months I had posted many of my writings on *sangomahood* and intercultural philosophy on a personal website. I began to be approached via e-mail by distant prospective clients, whom I could refer to my web pages for background information. Thus gradually a global practice emerged, where I would no longer meet my patients in person, but they – invariably total strangers to me – would contact me via an electronic intake form on my website, and they would subsequently receive via e-mail the outcome of the session I would conduct in their absence. I came to prefer this globalised format, especially because its communication is exclusively taking place via e-mail. In this way I could fit the sessions and the correspondence much more easily into my tight timetable, and I was relieved from nearly unbearable pressure. For no longer would I have to effectively perform as a diviner before the client; no longer would I have to know actively and by heart all the complex implications of the oracular catalogue (in the program they would neatly and in full appear on the computer screen, at every virtual ‘throw’); and no longer would I have to confront the client, directly and face-to-face, with such knowledge (potentially incorrect) about that client’s personal situation as I derived from the oracle. Under the new electronic format I could globally mediate a system of meaning and redress that I had experienced as eminently effective and meaningful myself, without shedding the commitments (towards a Southern African religious specialism, and towards suffering people in need of my assistance) that had informed my initiation into *sangomahood*, but also without constant violence to my personal psychological well-being, nor to the North Atlantic cultural and social context I found myself in.

This new, current phase of my *sangomahood* obviously contains lessons as to what it is to represent, mediate and practice a local cultural model outside its original context.¹ But it contains another lesson that may be even more original and important. It drove home to me the epistemological implications of *sangoma* divination, and thus brought out what initially I had taken for granted but had been too timid to claim and argue explicitly: my continued identification with *sangomahood* was not only a political stance of dogged solidarity ('if my Southern African hosts and friends take *sangomahood* seriously, who am I to deconstruct it as an idiom of illusion and power?'), it was not only an escape into an African identity after a childhood that had made me less than proud of my European identity – it was also, far less personally and far more interestingly, an acknowledgement of the fact that genuine knowledge is to be found also in *sangomahood* and not only in North Atlantic science. In this chapter I shall concentrate on the latter, epistemological theme.

In treating the knowledge as produced by *sangoma* divination from a perspective of mainstream, North Atlantic epistemology and the philosophy of science, I make a particular choice which has both its advantages and its disadvantages. African divination systems lay, subjectively at the *emic* level, a claim as to the truth of their pronouncements. They have been usually studied by anthropologists with a combination of a hermeneutic and a deconstructivist methodology: the play of symbols at the *emic* level is explained and rendered accessible in the international language of scholarship, and this is to make it possible to explain, in reductionist *etic* terms which deliberately abstract from the participants' conscious expressions, why the oracle creates a semblance of veridicity even though in fact all it can produce is tautological pseudo-knowledge, dextrously embellished with such convincing bits of true and verifiable information as the diviner manages to scrape from the client's verbal and non-verbal manifestations. Demonstrating that instead the oracle may be an independent source of valid knowledge, effectively confronts the allegation of pseudo-science, suggests that *sangoma* divination (and by implication similar forms of divination outside the North Atlantic region) are essentially a form of non-Western science, and reminds us of the need (so emphasised in Sandra Harding's recent work)² that modern, universalising science should learn from non-Western sciences to become aware of its own blind spots and one-sidedness, and ultimately team up with these sciences in order to understand the world better.

Another course of action away from hegemonic condescension could have been to take a more relative view also of North Atlantic science, and to stress that among mankind's many ways of knowing, scientific knowledge is neither particularly

¹ Also in my discussion of the concept of *ubuntu* in chapter 14 I will take up the question as to what happens when a Southern African traditional idiom is appropriated by outsiders and subsequently mediated in a globalised format.

² Harding 1994, 1997.

relevant nor particularly profound, whereas divination may constitute an idiom of wisdom, stammering at the threshold of that which cannot be expressed in words, and far exceeding any allegedly ephemeral, superficial truth that science can produce.

I have a number of reasons for not taking this turn, and instead stressing *sangoma* divination as eminently comparable to modern North Atlantic science.

In the first place, *sangoma* divination, although justified by reference to invisible ancestors attributed with the powers of omniscience and of effectively and formidably acting upon the visible world of the living, has never particularly struck me as an access to largely unsayable, perennial wisdom. In fact, in the course of the nearly fifteen years that I have lived with *sangomahood*, I have seen its inspirational and restructuring power in my own life dwindle from a massive flood at first, to a pleasant trickle now; and I have had to commit myself to other, apparently more profound, less clever, less inebriate, less power-centred, more original, in one word: to *wiser* forms of spirituality to guide me through the difficult patches of my personal life, and to finally unload the burden of my childhood. Such forms I found where I believe¹ that also *sangomahood* itself drew much of its symbolism, ritual forms and paraphernalia subsequently to be subjected to transformative localisation: in South Asian Hinduism and Buddhism. Such wisdom as *sangomahood* contains appears to address not so much the unquenchable depths of the soul but the ironic, power-centred pragmatics of the body and social life, much like Taoism to which it in fact seems to be somewhat indebted for both its pharmacopoeia and its cleromantic divination.²

But whether wise or superficial, resigned or will-driven, there is no doubt that the *sangoma* oracle, rather than conveying the barely speakable wisdom of the body,

¹ Cf. chapter 8, and particularly the book that grew out of my attempts (ultimately in vain) to accommodate within that chapter the results of my investigation of the world history of leopard-skin symbolism in the context of shamanism: *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots* (van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e)).

² There is an ironic contradiction here which I will spot without trying to resolve it fully. Concrete, pragmatic concerns such as health, wealth, social relations, power, loom large among the topics conventionally highlighted within the interpretative catalogue of the *sangoma* oracle. Also outside the specific divinatory context, when the *sangoma* is approached by the client for curative therapy or for magical intervention in the life of a third person, this is for secular concerns that reflect and address the ongoing social and economic process in the client's life. In the *sangomas'* professional self-image, their claimed access to extraordinary power and their right to commensurate financial remuneration is also highly developed:

'We are in this for the money',

as I describe and analyse this trait elsewhere at length (van Binsbergen 1999c). It is in this respect that I call *sangomahood* power-centred and will-centred. This does not preclude the fact – to be set out in the course of this chapter 7 – that the *sangoma's* actual *access* (or so I claim) to extrasensory knowledge and other forms of power depends on an altered state of consciousness characterised by *unfocusing*, where the will is the one destructive factor precluding this state of consciousness to arise or to be perpetuated. It is as if the transcendentalist techniques of auto-hygiene of South Asia have been transplanted to an immanentist African environment where, even if they are still effectively pursued as spiritual and bodily techniques, their application will inevitably be pragmatic and secular. The thrust of chapter 8 is that this seems to be exactly what has happened. Also cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (d), (e).

of the womb, on implicit femininity, is very highly verbalised. The divinatory exchange between diviner and client hinges on words not gestures or other symbols; this, incidentally, is why reducing the oracle to verbality alone and dispensing it via electronic mail does not appear ludicrous to me. In *sangoma* divination, just like in its sister forms Ifa, Sikidy, and in the original Arabic *ilm al-raml*, oracular procedures are highly conventionalised and formalised. The four unequivocally marked tablets yield exactly sixteen combinations which are consistently named and interpreted, each combination being accompanied by its own memorised praise formula. Formalisation is such that a committee of diviners can examine the divinatory performance of a candidate for membership of an association of traditional healers, without ever having seen the candidate before, let alone having taken part in her or his training. The system is largely external to its practitioners and its clients, although the diviner's creative mind adapts the system's potential to the problem at hand, and weaves from such ingredients as the system has to offer, a convincing narrative that matches the specific situation and the needs of the client.

Admittedly, at the same time every divination session constitutes (in the best anthropological tradition so brilliantly represented by the work of Victor Turner, Richard Werbner and René Devisch) a minimum ritual drama about the causes and conditions of human suffering, the evasiveness of truth, humans' moral and ritual responsibilities and shortcomings, and man's longing for comfort and deliverance. The cathartic social drama evolving in a well-staged divination session goes beyond the contents of the words exchanged, and precisely because of its social and tactual components (the exclamations of distress, of insight, of suffering; the presence of the ancestral and the divine which is at one's fingertips when tossing the tables, blowing over them and throwing them) rearranges the client's sense of self, meaning, misery and hope, in many more ways than the words alone would make possible.

In this chapter, I will pass over this dramatic, ritual side. This certainly does not do full justice to *sangoma* divination, and risks missing the aesthetics and the existential *raison d'être* of divination. But even so, my approach seems to be the most appropriate if one wishes to do justice to another side which is of the greatest importance, both

- for an understanding of healing, and
- for the rehabilitation of forms of knowledge outside the North Atlantic region.

Let me define this other side. As far as healing is concerned: beyond sleight-of-hand, impression management, and petty techniques of therapeutic counselling (which all do make part of *sangoma* practice), it is *the oracle's manifest veridicity* that creates authority for the therapeutic system the *sangoma* extends to the client – so that the *sangoma's* specific pronouncements concerning causes and remedies of the client's suffering may benefit from this authority, and release in the patient the power and the confidence to heal herself or himself. And as far as knowledge is concerned: if *sangomahood* makes it possible to arrive at veridical pronouncements

about verifiable aspects of empirical reality, merely by casting a few wooden tablets and memorising a simple conventionalised interpretational catalogue of combinations and meanings, then this can only mean that *the structure of reality is fundamentally different from what the scientific collective representations circulating in the North Atlantic region make people believe*. At the same time, the structure of reality as suggested by the *sangoma* oracle need not be different from the implications also of today's most advanced theories of the world, in quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity – on the contrary, it is my contention that the two approaches (*sangomahood* and state-of-the-art North Atlantic science) can very well be combined within a single, unified, intercultural epistemology. But this does not mean that *sangomahood* has to pass under the yoke of North Atlantic intellectual appropriation. Accounted for in terms of an ancestral idiom, *sangomahood*, as an established technology of knowing and as an elaborate practice of working upon the world and its human components, unleashes potentials which are beginning to find very differently phrased but essentially converging expressions in up-to-date North Atlantic science – but the latter is still only setting the first steps towards turning such knowledge into practice. It is time to shed North Atlantic region's hegemonic condescension vis-à-vis African ritual, and instead to learn, to listen, and to share, in an intercultural encounter.

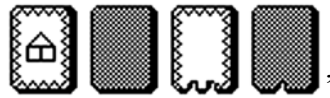
7.2. Technical procedure

Let me first describe the current procedures in my *sangoma* practice in some detail.

My *sangoma* oracular program happens to be on a stand-alone Macintosh microcomputer without Internet connection. The intake form reaches me on a different, Windows-operated, computer where all subsequent e-mail correspondence with the clients is also conducted.¹ I use the keyboard and mouse of the stand-alone computer to enter the meagre details of a client's intake form into the program I have written. A dialogue box appears. I type a question on behalf of the client (gradually, in subsequent throws, creatively refining the question while the client is and remains absent). I press the Enter button activating the computer's random generator facility so as to let one of the sixteen oracular combinations appear. Next, verbally interpreting that combination as a reply to the question, I type the answer onto the dialogue box that appears subsequently. The sequence of question and answers combines into an unfolding narrative. After a series of thirty to forty throws, i.e. combinations, the session's narrative approaches its natural conclusion. The session's end has to be announced by the random appearance of the combination *Mbango* at this point:

¹ So it is unlikely that during the sessions the Internet in itself could have served as a medium to transmit any telepathic influences which, as I shall argue below, might constitute a likely explanation of the extraordinary phenomena encountered in *sangoma* divination.

Sangoma divination: translatable to a global format, source of valid knowledge



whose usual associated meanings are:


‘fence post; home; patrilineal kin; dust raised by covering a grave; death; threat; a womb; pregnancy; dust of travelling; accomplished *sangomahood*; intestines; domestic lizard; python’;

however, towards the end of the session this combination always means:

‘the bones wish to sleep’.


[... end of throw 3 ...]
 question: what sort of help and treatment does the client need?

throw no. 4 *Mbunga* (15) hidden combination = *Mashangula* (16)
 peripheral is: closed
 hidden combination inspected

stays with hidden combination: *Mashangula* (16) 


*chosen aspect: there are indications that there is something missing in the client’s family life and sex life, or that he has a sexually transmitted disease, perhaps AIDS
 question: is there something wrong with the client in the sense that he has a sexually transmitted disease?

throw no. 5 *Take* (7) hidden combination = *Mpululu* (8)
 peripheral is: closed
 hidden combination inspected

stays with hidden combination: *Mpululu* (8) 

*chosen aspect: the answer is ambiguous since it indicates that, even if it were the case that the client has a sexually transmitted disease, this may not exclusively be to his disadvantage
 question: did the client recently lose a beloved lover?

throw no. 6 *Kwaga* (13) hidden combination = *Shilume* (2)
 peripheral is: open
 there is no reason to pay special attention to the hidden combination
 hidden combination left uninspected, ignored

stays with the original combination *Kwaga* (13) 

*chosen aspect: it looks as if he did lose a lover, or was unable to develop a love relationship, because his life was being overshadowed by his mother
 question: is his mother exerting a positive influence on his life? [follows throw no. 7, etc.]

Table 7.1. A fragment of the protocol of a *sangoma* divination session in a globalised format and to be dispatched as e-mail.

The session cannot be concluded until the combination *Mbango* has appeared. Finally the program produces a full protocol document setting out all the successive throws, questions, and interpreted answers, and yielding (because the successive answers constitute a narrative) not only a more or less coherent interpretation of the client's predicament in ancestral and (rarely) witchcraft terms and ritual advice towards its redress, but also extensive and detailed biographical information which the client will recognise as partly correct even though it was never provided by the client himself on the intake form.

The distant client will receive this protocol by e-mail. Here the various throws of the sessions will be recorded in a way illustrated by Table 7.1.

7.3. The oracle as a source of information

Two sources of information in the *sangoma* divination session are uncontroversially given:

- (a) what the client brings to the session in terms of explicit personal information disclosed to the diviner, and
- (b) what the diviner can draw from the *sangoma* oracle's standardised, conventionalised catalogue of meanings and symbolic implications, each meaning indicated by one of sixteen named combinations produced by the fall of the four distinctively marked tablets.

If the combination of (a) and (b) exhaustively described the information content of the divination process, divination could not be an independent source of valid knowledge. All the diviner would be doing would amount to dextrously juggling – in perfunctory reference to the completely accidental fall of the tablets – the variety of meanings under (b), and weave these into an intelligent, consciously made-up story about (a), to which the diviner consciously adds his advice about possible courses for ritual and practical action, which if executed might enhance the client's grip on her or his life. The diviner would know that the divination session's content was deliberately constructed from his matching (a) and (b) into a coherent story, and would be able to recount the steps in that construction. The session protocol would be some kind of a personalised poem with exhortative power, the latter enhanced because of the diviner's effective performative display during real-life sessions (which, however, is greatly reduced if the contact between diviner and client only takes place electronically and the session is conducted in the absence of the client).

I have repeatedly described the *sangoma* divination in the above terms in earlier publications, without more than passing reference to the possibility that, beyond the placebo effect implied in the above divinatory model, the session might also be:

- (c) an independent source of knowledge in its own right –

in other words, knowledge that, under the prevailing sensorialist assumptions of contemporary empirical science, would be considered to be utterly unavailable to the diviner since it could not have reached him through his sense organs.

Much of chapter 5 was about the social and personal pressures that brought a specialist in the anthropology of religion to the point where he was prepared to adopt local religious beliefs and practices because he could not bear the breach of sociability implied in the alternative (i.e. the continuation of his deconstructive analytical distance). We need to realise at this point that the implicit acceptance of local belief as an idiom of sociability works also in the North Atlantic region. Ever since the eighteenth century, the popularisation of the ideals and achievements of the Enlightenment has installed powerful collective representations in the North Atlantic region in the form of rationalism, sensorialism, secularisation of the world view, scepticism, scientism. Ironically, today's common collective representations have continued to cling to a Cartesian body–mind dualism, that has been largely discarded by professional philosophers in the course of the twentieth century.¹ Foucault² has argued that scientific rationality has supplanted religion as the central touchstone of truth, morality and political legitimation in the Modern Age. In the light of these contemporary collective representations in the North Atlantic region, it means a breach of the locally prevailing canons of sociability when a returning fieldworker emphatically and without ostentatious irony claims occult experiences and powers, publicly displayed allegiance to which was informing her sociability only a short while earlier, when still in the field.

The social sanctions springing from such a breach of North Atlantic sociability ('how could you be a *sangoma* and a university professor at the same time, tell us!'), are based – as I shall critically argue below – not only on a relativist departmentalisation of the world into distinct cultures, but also on perceived incongruency between non-Western world views and dominant collective representations in the North. The latter pose as, and are felt to be, unshakable scientific truths established once and for all, but of course that is only an illusion. All collective representations take on absolute connotations for those upholding them; Durkheim, to whom we owe the concept and the theory of 'collective representations' (*représentations collectives*), has argued that this is how society constructs itself while endowing itself with the characteristics of the sacred.³ Seen in this light, these modernist contemporary collective representations, although scientific in appearance, might be exposed to be merely *scientistic* – they assume the trappings of science but are inherently non-scientific in that they fail to recognise the limitations of science. They cannot accommodate the notion according to which every scientific

¹ Cf. Ryle 1949; Hart 1988, 1998.

² Foucault 1963, 1969.

³ Durkheim 1912.

truth is *by definition* provisional and ephemeral, merely waiting for its refutation or, at best, reformulation under a new, equally provisional and ephemeral truth.¹

Today's scientific collective representations tend to deny (in the name of a dated scientific world view, notably the mechanicism and sensorialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century CE) that there could be any truth in telepathy, psychokinesis, and other topics studied by parapsychology; we shall come back to this dismissive attitude below. By the same token this scientific world view includes the conviction that there could not possibly be *some infinitesimal, residual* truth in astrology and other forms of divination. Yet these divinatory disciplines constitute forms of systematic knowledge (even, in the case of astrology, highly mathematical forms, and dependent on scientific astronomy, with all the appearances of rationality) that from the very beginnings of human science in Ancient Mesopotamia five millennia ago,² right up to the Enlightenment, were so much at the centre of what people considered valid scientific knowledge that for centuries they were taught at European universities. It is only in the last two hundred years that they have been effectively relegated to the status of pseudo-sciences, a dismissal authoritatively endorsed by the twentieth century's most vocal philosopher of science, Karl Popper.³ Beside constituting a *prima facie* case for rejection by the philosophy of science, most philosophers today would not even consider the topic worthy of their interest,⁴ having their negative opinion confirmed by Barthes, who in his *Mythologiques* says of astrology:

‘What it does is to exorcise the real even by speaking about it. (...) Astrology is the writing *par excellence* of the petty bourgeois world.’⁵

Sangoma divination is not identical to astrology, but it largely derives from Arabic geomantic divination (*‘ilm al-raml*) which emerged, just over a thousand years ago, as a simplification of astrology. Today's scientific collective representations, therefore, would be equally dismissive of *sangoma* divination. However, it is now time to play a powerful trump and claim that, whether we like it or not and whether our theories can accommodate such a state of affairs or not, the *sangoma* oracle is an independent machine for the production of valid knowledge.

¹ Popper 1959. Interestingly, Popper deploys the same criterion (lack of interest in refutation) to attack astrology (1959: 34, 38).

² Bottéro 1992; van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 1999; and extensive references cited there.

³ Popper 1976: 38.

⁴ However, cf. Seidel 1971.

⁵ Barthes 1957: 168; emphasis original:

‘Elle sert à exorciser le réel en le nommant. (...) L’astrologie *est* la littérature du monde petit-bourgeois.’

There has been some sociological research to back up Barthes' intuition as to the lower-middle class locus of astrology consumption in contemporary western Europe, cf. Couderc 1934; Maitre 1968. Outside Europe, such research has been conducted in India: Padhye 1937; Pugh 1983a, 1983b, 1984. Studies and pamphlets setting out the scientific and ethical objections against astrology are numerous. For a comprehensive treatment, cf. Couderc 1980; van Klinkenberg 1983; Bok *et al.* 1975.

If I had not found this truth so often (although far from invariably) confirmed in hundreds of situations when, over the past one and a half decades, I have engaged in *sangoma* divination, I would have long ceased to identify as a *sangoma*. I would have given in to the professional and general North Atlantic cultural pressures to drop such an utterly unscientific celebration of ‘superstition’ and ‘pseudo-science’. I would have returned to the religious anthropological position initially taught to me by my teachers to the effect that African religion, including *sangomahood*, cannot be a source of valid knowledge in its own right and is only meaningfully to be discussed in terms of condescending deconstruction, as some sort of African pseudo-science.

If I had not experienced the empirical validity of the knowledge generated by *sangoma* divination, I might never have strayed from my career as an empirical social anthropologist. I would not have been forced to contemplate the nature of intercultural knowledge construction sufficiently long and profoundly so as to become, willy-nilly, an intercultural philosopher and write the present book. Also, at least some of my clients would have seen through my game of dextrous deception, would have realised that all they received back during the sessions is what they themselves put into the communication with me in the first place, and they would no longer be inclined to follow the injunctions I impart to them in an ancestral idiom, for them to reorganise their lives.

The divination session is demonstrably a valid source of knowledge in its own right. It is the recognition of previously undisclosed yet verifiable and correct knowledge massively seeping through in my divination sessions, that convinces both my clients and myself that here we are onto something that we had better take seriously. And since mainstream North Atlantic science does not offer us a theoretical explanation for this phenomenon, we are forced to recognise *sangomahood* in its own right as a local body of (at least partially) valid procedures generating and implying knowledge about the natural and human order – a body that is not disqualified by its being at variance with the sensorialist premises of North Atlantic science, but on the contrary a reminder of the fact that there are demonstrable aspects of reality that simply happen not to be captured by North Atlantic science.

New Age¹ as an intellectual movement today abounds with centrifugal knowledge claims of a similar nature, as it also abounds with ordinary, average-educated people prepared to take such claims seriously in their lives. There are now many hundreds of thousands of adult inhabitants of the North Atlantic region alone, who as clients or practitioners, or both, engage in any of the hundreds of forms of divination available, from *I Ching* and runic divination to tarot, the Zulu bones oracle, and Native American varieties, with astrology in its many variations as the most widespread and most constant basic form; after a century of decline, astrology has made a major comeback in the North Atlantic region from the late nineteenth

¹ For a comprehensive critical study of the New Age movement, cf. Greverus 1990.

century CE onwards. A growing number of these methods have been standardised, formalised, often re-invented,¹ and via compendia, manuals, and practical kits have made their way into New Age shops and onto Internet sites. While this creates a platform and a market for such divinatory practices, their popularisation and commercialisation makes them admittedly more rather than less suspect – and for decades now scientifically inclined Sceptics (brandishing this capitalised epithet as a badge of honour) have been rallying around journals and, more recently, Internet sites to have such divinatory practices exposed as either fraudulent or mere childish mystifications.² The Sceptics' intransigence is understandable: these divinatory practices seem to imply a rejection of the very foundations of modern science,³ for they are claimed by their supporters to produce independently (either always, or only under specific circumstances, for example in the hands of trained practitioners working for believers) valid knowledge through extrasensory means.

A claim like this does not have to be dismissed on the ground of first principles alone; in fact, that type of dismissal would be rather unscientific because the established scientific principles of today are sure to be the obsolete views to be discarded tomorrow. The divinatory knowledge claim is in principle suited for empirical testing, notably by the science of parapsychology. This discipline's voluminous body of empirical research⁴ has created solid evidence for the existence of telepathy and psychokinesis – convincing that is, by statistical standards (for example, experimental designs and levels of significance) generally accepted in other fields of the social sciences, especially experimental psychology. It is typical of the scientistic climate throughout the twentieth century in the North Atlantic region that parapsychology is yet often considered a playground for methodologically and philosophically suspect obscurantism, whose empirical findings as to the existence of telepathy and psychokinesis are simply ignored or denied.

A well-known author on a crusade against scientism is Feyerabend. One is reminded of his caustic critique of a group of nearly 200 prominent scientists, who felt they could confidently sign a declaration⁵ against astrology without knowing

¹ In the sense given to the concept of 're-invention' (i.e. cultural bricolage creatively but spuriously legitimated by reference to the past) by Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983.

² Cf. Bok *et al.* 1975; Frazier 1991, 1998; Hines 1988.

³ Cf. Duran 1982: 196:

'The field of paranormal research in general (...) calls for philosophical examination precisely because some paranormal claims seem to clash with our twentieth-century presuppositions about reality.'

This view is however not universally endorsed; e.g. the prominent French physicist Costa de Beauregard (1991) sees complete compatibility between physics and the kind of phenomena studied by parapsychology. Also cf. Bierman *et al.* 1991; Josephson & Viras 1991; Radin & Nelson 1989; Bierman 1993. All of these are high-ranking professional physicists, *i.e.* specialists in state-of-the-art conceptions of physical reality.

⁴ Cf. Irwin 1999; Cardena *et al.* 2000.

⁵ Bok *et al.* 1975.

enough about the topic to realise that their declaration was seriously misrepresenting it:

‘...scientists quite often just don’t know what they are talking about. They have strong opinions, they know some standard arguments for these opinions, they may even know some results outside the particular field in which they are doing research but most of the time they depend, and have to depend (because of specialization) on *gossip* and *rumours*. No special intelligence, no technical knowledge is needed to find this out. Anyone with some perseverance can make the discovery and he will then also find that many of the rumours that are presented with such assurance are nothing but simple mistakes’.¹

Elsewhere Feyerabend paraphrases Comte as arguing² that a disadvantage of the scientific revolution has been that it has made us completely disregard any connections between human life and the solar system, instead of continuing to study further such connections as were recognised by astrology but apparently for the wrong reasons – reasons which the scientific revolution has helped us to identify as obsolete. The case of astrology is adopted by Feyerabend as emblematic for his rebellious brand of the philosophy of science. No doubt in order to shock serious modern minds, on the cover of both of his books cited above, the diagram of his birth horoscope accompanies his photograph as if to make any further, discursively formulated, bibliographical information superfluous. Regrettably he withholds from astrologically uninitiated readers (a majority) an explicit analysis of this birth chart, which if provided would have cast some ironic light (albeit only stellar, and pseudo-scientific, of course) on fundamental characteristics of his writing: methodological homelessness (cf. no planet in the first house), an agile relativism (cf. Mercury in conjunction with the Sun in the fourth house) and the aggressive urge (cf. strongest possible Mars, in exultation) to be victorious in debate (cf. strongest possible Jupiter, likewise in exultation)

However, Feyerabend represents a minority option. In philosophy, a major exponent of the dismissive trend is Antony Flew, who in an influential article sums up what was already an hypercritical and incorrect view of parapsychology in the early 1980s and what can certainly not be considered true today: parapsychology, he alleges, cannot boast a single repeatable experiment, nor an

‘even half-way plausible theory with which to account for the materials it [parapsychology] is supposed to explain ...’.³

On the other hand, decades earlier the potential of parapsychology for philosophy was widely recognised by such continental philosophers as Driesch and

¹ Feyerabend 1978: 89; italics original.

² Feyerabend 1975: 100n 1; Comte 1830-1842, III: 273-280.

³ Flew 1982: 180, 189; cf. 1987. Meanwhile, for an example of an excellent meta-analysis of a parapsychological project, cf. Honorton 1985. Also cf. Bierman *et al.* 1991. Towards the end of the present chapter we shall encounter examples of plausible theories which exist now but not, admittedly, when Flew first wrote, in 1982.

Heymans,¹ and also in Anglo-Saxon contexts, where Broad outlined the four limiting basic principles that have since often formed the point of departure in philosophical approaches to parapsychology. According to Broad, we can only speak of causality if we have some identifiable causal chain; the only way for the mind to work upon matter is in producing states in the brain; no mind without brain, hence the impenetrability of different minds: they are attached to different brains; and finally the tenet of sensorialism (no valid knowledge claims unless by reference to a causal chain involving the senses).²

7.4. Do the oracular pronouncements constitute knowledge in the technical epistemological sense?

The phenomena which parapsychology studies touch on all central topics in philosophical enquiry: the nature of man and the universe, of mind, time, space, causality, knowledge, truth, God – and, as we shall see in the present chapter, interculturality. Broad's principles introduce a theme that has since been recurrent in philosophical approaches to the subject:³ can information gained by extrasensory means properly be called 'knowledge'?

If we define knowledge, traditionally, as 'justified true belief', the claim that the *sangoma* oracle is an independent source of valid knowledge is problematic. In Duran's succinct but non-controversial formulation:

'A person can be said to know that p if and only if: (i) p is true; (ii) p is believed; and (iii) adequate evidence for p is had.'⁴

Although she does not fail to acknowledge that certainly since Gettier this is no longer state-of-the art epistemology,⁵ her formulation raises enough problems for our present purpose. If the *sangoma* oracle is to possess the characteristics I claim for it, in terms of Duran's expression this means that the following criteria are to be met:

- (i) its statements are true;
- (ii) the diviner believes them to be true; and
- (iii) the diviner has adequate evidence for them.

I choose the diviner, and not the client, as the most obvious human agent claimed to have knowledge, i.e. justified true belief; the diviner's pronouncements are subsequently imparted to the client, and there the same three criteria could be

¹ Driesch 1932; Heymans 1913.

² Broad 1949.

³ Cf. Flew 1982: 181, and especially Duran 1982 on which the next paragraph is based.

⁴ Duran 1982: 202.

⁵ Cf. Gettier 1963; Moser 1993.

applied, but I take it that the client's knowing is only secondarily derived from the diviner's, and therefore does not centrally concern us here.

For the diviner as the knowing subject we now have to ascertain if the three criteria are met.

If the client is present during the session, *the truth of certain oracular statements* may be more or less verified on the spot, for example whether the client has a twin, whether that twin is of the female gender, etc. But such verification may be tricky: what if, for instance, the divination session brings up a twin who died at birth and of which only the birth attendant, mother, etc. may know without the client ever having been told? Then the statement assigning a twin to the client would still be true, as might be ascertained later from hospital records, etc., although it would be rejected as false by the client during the session. Of course, it is the oracular statement's intrinsic truth, not the client's agreement, that we are after here.

Within and outside the context of divination sessions, many if not most human statements cannot be immediately nor exhaustively verified in the same situation in which they are made. But whether ascertained on the spot or at some later moment in time and outside the divination session, it is not the truth of the oracular statements that poses the greatest difficulty. The oracle's statements come in two kinds: those referring to empirical natural conditions ('the client has a twin'), and those referring to the client's dealing with the ancestral world which – whatever the diviner's and the client's beliefs on this point – has no unequivocal or direct impact on the world of the senses. Incidentally, this distinction between empirical and non-empirical references of oracular statements, although useful for developing an epistemological argument, reminds us that at this point we have completely resigned ourselves to an *etic* position, without the slightest attempt of adopting, *emically*, the point of view of the *sangoma* and his client: they may believe in the ancestors as a continuous part of everyday reality, manifesting themselves there in, what are to them, significant and non-problematic ways – they would be surprised, and unconvinced, when told that these ways may not be amenable to empirical demonstration by North Atlantic scientific means. The claims that the *sangoma* oracle independently produces verifiable empirical knowledge cannot refer to the ancestral world, for that claim is meant for a North Atlantic scientific audience, it is analytical, *etic*, and can only be substantiated by methods endorsed by North Atlantic science. So what remains to be verified under criterion (i) are the oracular statements referring to empirical conditions, and such verification is non-problematic although it may involve some work if the session is about distant clients previously unknown to the diviner. Further we have to decide whether, in order to pass criterion (i),

- (a) all empirical statements that the oracle produces need to be true, or
- (b) only a significantly greater number than could be expected on the basis of chance.

I suggest that (b) would be enough to substantiate my claim in so far as criteria (i) is concerned, but below we shall see that the oracle's performance for empirical statements tends even towards (a).

The next criterion to be assessed is *whether the diviner believes the empirical statements as produced by the oracle to be true*. In the course of the session the diviner produces a sustained narrative explaining the client's predicament and possible redress in ancestral terms (often mixed with witchcraft terms). This narrative gradually develops: it is strung together, step by step, from the successive specific interpretations which the diviner attaches to each throw, i.e. each combination that comes up after a particular throw, interpreted also in the light of a peripheral counter that can take not 16 but only 2 different values ('open' or 'closed'). Before the session the diviner prepares by putting on his sacred beaded necklaces, each of them associated with a particular substantial sacrifice in the past, by specific prayers, and by offering libations or snuff offerings to the ancestors. The consultation of the oracle is conducted in a particular state of consciousness – to be defined below – meant to open the diviner's mind to any extrasensory information that may come across, but at the same time the diviner knows to be responsible for the weaving of the narrative, for the articulate throw-by-throw interpretation of each combination as it comes up, and for formulating the next question before each successive throw. Every combination is interpreted¹ along eight different dimensions (ancestors, witchcraft, animals and totems, the human body, socio-political situations, objets, standard praises, and a conventional general meaning of the combination), and the diviner has to choose the dimension that fits best in the ongoing narrative – unless he decides (as may typically happen in the early stages of the session, after half a dozen throws) that the combination that has just come up demonstrates that the incipient narrative developed so far is spurious and needs to be replaced by a more fitting one. Aware of the very different (often radically opposed) meanings which a particular combination may have under the eight dimensions, the diviner makes a choice which, while deliberate and usually taking into account the evolving narrative so far, yet needs to present itself to the diviner as the most obvious, or the only possible choice. In other words, in the awareness of alternatives the diviner produces that meaning for a particular throw that he considers to be truer than any other of the alternatives. Therefore, the statement that is finally made as the interpretation of that particular throw is believed to be true by the diviner, but at the same time he is aware of being himself the instrument in the construction of that truth, and of having had a certain freedom in that construction. That construction is pronounced in good faith, although often with considerable anxiety: the diviner knows this statement to be the truest that could be produced under the circumstances,

¹ In a way comparable with the house system in astrology, where the interpretation of each planetary position and each aspect (a specific angular relationship between planets) is coloured by the specific house in which it occurs, out of a total of twelve houses, each house being specifically associated with one of the following topics: origin, family, wealth, marriage, the work place, illness and death, etc.

but – like any diviner, and like most clients and observers – he is also aware of the fact that throughout history, and across divination techniques, many oracular statements have been known to be only partially true, or to be false. Particularly in face-to-face sessions, where the statements are produced once and for all and cannot be reviewed retrospectively in the light of the subsequent part of the session, this produces an almost unbearable stress in some diviners – including myself. My stress does not only spring from the realisation that the client has already secure knowledge of the biographical details I am only trying to divine (and thus could call my bluff at any moment!), and not only from the distress which the emphatic exposure to the client's personal history imparts on me, but also from the fact that long before I became a diviner I was an empirical scientist with expertise in statistics and probability theory; while I know it to be my role to produce true oracular statements, I am often surprised to find out, later, that that is precisely what I did during a session – I am generally aware that my statements might be wrong, although some hunches carry such a lapidary sense of conviction that they simply appear as utterly true when I pronounce them to the client. I submit that criterion (ii) has been met albeit in a peculiar dynamic fashion. The diviner believes the oracular statements to be true in the same manner as an author in an empirical discipline (history, anthropology) believes his texts to be true: also there, the contents of the statement do not appear before the knower in a finished state for him to believe or disbelieve, but they are constructed by himself, and in the optionality of that construction the struggle for truth competes with the awareness of alternatives.

A further problem crops up here: apart from the compositional systematics of the evolving narrative (which in itself could be expected to yield elegance, but not truth), what other clues does the diviner have to decide for one dimension rather than for another, and to apply that dimension in a specific way in order to arrive at the final interpretation of that particular throw? Already half a century ago, Ducasse, on the basis of Louisa Rhine's survey of 3000 cases, claimed that in cases of spontaneous precognition or contemporaneous extrasensory cognition across a distance, the veridical or illusory nature of such an impression usually appeared not to be marked as such in the consciousness of the subject; the subject allegedly did not experience the veridical, factual images differently from the illusory, spurious ones.¹ The finding surprises me in the light of numerous other reports in which subjects were greatly moved by visions and dreams involving their beloved, and which somehow they were convinced to be true.² If the diviner knows himself to take an active part in the production of the meaning of a combination (given the eight dimensions, and the evolving narrative), how can he sufficiently reduce that awareness of actively and freely constructing, and perceive one alternative to be truer than all others? All I can say is that in the sessions I cultivate a receptive state of mind in which I try to open myself up to what appears to be 'selecting in me',

¹ Ducasse 1954.

² Tenhaeff 1980.

‘articulating in me’ – and this state of mind (a very light trance, perhaps) is not different from how I write poetry, and scientific prose, or how I lecture, or engage in an intensive conversation outside sessions. During the oracular sessions there is one type of interpretations that have the hallmark of truth and are invariably preferred by me over alternatives: those that are at first sight so weird, so unexpected, yet so strangely compelling, that I simply do not stop to doubt their being inspired and true.

Finally: is the diviner’s belief in the oracular statements he produces justified belief in the sense that he has adequate evidence for them? Of course, such justification has only secondarily to do with the subsequent verification of the statement as under criterion (i) – regardless of whether the oracular statement proves ultimately true or false, the justification for belief in its truth has to be available in the situation at hand. The evidence at the diviner’s disposal is composed of

- (a) the client’s initial intake statement,
- (b) the oracular catalogue’s inner symbolism and associational structure, and, most importantly,
- (c) the successive specific fall of the tablets in response to specific questions instigated by the client’s intake statement.

This is all. From an external, *etic* perspective, within mainstream North Atlantic sensorialist epistemology in which this argument triggered by Duran is being developed, we are persuaded to assume that the random generator involved (i.e. shuffling and throwing of physical tablets, or using a subroutine on the computer) works independently of the diviner’s, the client’s, or any other mind, and that it blindly produces combinations without in any way taking into account such information as the world at large may contain about this client. From this perspective, in other words, the evidence for the truth of the oracular statements cannot be considered adequate.

But again we must realise that the crux of the problem is that we are operating, in this argument, at the borderline between North Atlantic epistemology and *sangoma* science. For the Southern African *sangoma* the answer is simple. The oracle is the means by which the ancestors manifest themselves in the world of the living; the *sangoma* is the elected representative (incarnation, even) of the ancestors among the living; the *sangoma* is trained to read the oracle correctly and has added to his initial training by years of experience; and for all these various reasons the *sangoma*’s belief in the truth of the oracular statements is certainly justified and will be supported by others sharing his socio-cultural environment.

For the North Atlantic *sangoma* who at the same time is an empirical scientist and a professor of philosophy the answer is, alas, less straightforward. The ancestral beliefs are implied in his role as *sangoma*; but how completely absorbed can he be in that role if in his other professional capacities he is tempted to deconstruct the concept of ‘ancestor’ as an idiom to speak of power relations, social control, intra-kin hierarchy, sociability, a web of causality and information encompassing the

whole of nature and all past conditions that have gone into producing the present client with his particular predicaments, etc.? By ritual preparation I make sure my *sangoma* role is reinforced before the onset of the session, and a boundary is erected between being the *sangoma* and being the North Atlantic academic; yet even during the session the alternatives to the ancestral interpretation cannot completely be locked out and are likely to seep through that boundary. I find myself occasionally reaching for psychoanalytical and Jungian interpretative models if these seem to apply to the evolving narrative about the client. I find myself applying common-sense knowledge and deduction, for instance, when it comes to deducing whether a client could or could not be responsible for a particular pregnancy in view of his whereabouts at the time of conception. On the other hand, present oracular readings exist against the background of the diviner's previous experiences with the oracle, and if the latter is known to have consistently produced correct empirical statements in the past, this in itself forms a justification for a belief in the truth of the present statement. I take it that criterion (iii) is met, albeit with difficulty, in the same dynamic and internally tensioned way as criterion (ii).

So I am not sending the reader on a fool's errand, after all: the *sangoma* oracle can be held to produce *knowledge*, and the claim that it does so independently, and correctly, is meaningful, although it remains to be substantiated throughout the remainder of this chapter's argument.

Meanwhile, however, our discussion has hinted at a condition we were not quite prepared for. What we have demonstrated, in passing, is the difficulty of rendering the concept of knowledge meaningful in an intercultural situation that involves more than one cultural orientation: statements that undoubtedly constitute 'knowledge' from the point of view of Southern African *sangomahood*, require sleight-of-hand, or a stretch of the imagination, to be made to be 'knowledge' under North Atlantic epistemology – and yet the latter constitutes (as I shall argue below, on formal and historical grounds) an intellectual specialism well comparable to *sangomahood*. Are we forced to conclude that intercultural knowledge is a contradiction in itself – because true knowledge can only exist within one culturally constructed life-world? Such a question (with the implied license for relativism) would move us outside the present argument, but we need to come back to it towards the end of this chapter. Let us now return to parapsychology.

7.5. The *sangoma* oracle as a source of valid knowledge about the world of the senses

In the course of the twentieth century, parapsychology has produced a voluminous body of (often) rigorous and (often) quantitative evidence for the existence (albeit marginally, and surrounded by a lot of bigotry and fraud)¹ of telepathy and

¹ Rhine 1975; another notorious case of fraud, involving S.G. Soal and a University of London doctorate, is cited in Flew 1982: 179.

psychokinesis.¹ Specific studies have been undertaken concerning the empirical validity, if any, of established divinatory methods, notably astrology.² The evidence in favour of astrology brought forward in those studies is puzzling and contradictory, but too substantial to be dismissed off-hand.

But even if the astrologers may have a smattering of right on their side, the theories they have advanced since Antiquity in order to *explain* their specific findings are in themselves problematic. How is it to be believed that specific, relatively small sectors of the heavens (zodiacal signs), planets and fixed stars, once named after an obsolete and culturally specific system of animal symbolism and mythology but now (due to precession and scientific redefinition)³ drifted far away from the places originally associated with named Near Eastern, Egyptian and Hellenic constellations, could have a systematic and detectable influence on people who happen to be born whenever those sectors occupy a particular position in the heavens and whenever some of the major bodies in our solar system (the sun, the planets, and the earth's main satellite, the moon) as seen from earth appear to be projected in certain ephemeral positions against these sectors?

But although until recently no plausible theory had been advanced concerning the physical mechanism that could be involved as the causal chain linking celestial and earthly phenomena, very comprehensive statistical analyses by the Gauquelins, while playing havoc with most traditional astrological correlations between birth horoscope and personal traits, yet detected, in the birth horoscopes of major professional groups (athletes, soldiers, statesmen, artists, etc.), amazing regularities reminiscent of astrology.⁴ Meanwhile, with the advances in geophysics and astrophysics over the past decades, plausible models have been formulated in terms of interplanetary magnetism, occlusion of these influences by the earth or the moon, and reinforcement or diminishment of these effects when the major bodies in our solar system make a particular angle vis-à-vis one another – the very angles that feature in the astrological theory of aspects which dates back to Late Antiquity.

¹ E.g. Grattan-Guinness 1982; Angoff & Barth 1974; Long 1977; Murphy 1961; Rhine & Pratt 1972; Hansel 1980; Kelly & Locke 1981; Rhine & Rhine 1943; Ludwig 1978; Eysenck & Sargent 1982; Edge *et al.* 1986; Wolman 1985; Tenhaeff 1958, 1980.

² Jung 1972; von Franz 1980; Eysenck & Nias 1982; Toonder & West 1970; and see particularly the work by the Gauquelins, cited below. For a reliable critical assessment of these defences of astrology, cf. Kelly 1982, who explains with an appeal to normal psychology why astrology so often seems to 'have a point' without any special effect from the heavens being involved; yet also Kelly has to concede that undeniable evidence partly supports the basic tenet of astrology.

³ Precession is the phenomenon of the progressive movement of the vernal point (the moment that night and day have the same duration) across the zodiac in the course of millennia, due to the fact that in addition to diurnal rotation the ends of the earth's axis describe a slow circular movement, like that of a top's. In modern times, the constellations were fixed scientifically so as to cover, together, the entire heaven, often in ways deviating from the ancient constellations.

⁴ Kelly 1982; F. Gauquelin 1980; M. Gauquelin 1969, 1970, 1973; Gauquelin & Gauquelin 1977-1978. The Gauquelins have perfected a line of research that has a much longer history, e.g. Flamard 1908, 1913; Choisnard 1924.

Feyerabend refers to extensive work already available in the mid-1970s, indicating that extraterrestrial effects on terrestrial phenomena, including living organisms, are demonstrable with standard scientific methods.¹ In the quarter of a century that has elapsed since, this literature has steadily grown.²

However, the rest of my argument in this chapter, concerning the detailed analysis of the *sangoma* oracle, suggests that those wishing to prove the objective correctness of astrological pronouncements may be right, but only for the wrong reasons.

If astrological, or any other, divinatory procedures ever produce valid knowledge, it may well be because the diviner, initially confronted with a complex and contradictory pattern (such as the mathematical analysis of a birth horoscope, with all the different angles which the planets can assume vis-à-vis each other, in so many different positions of exaltation or decadence, in so many different houses and signs), is forced to make interpretational choices that, although they apparently spring from established, impersonal, intersubjective, time-honoured divinatory (for example astrological) procedure, *in fact are highly selective and largely at his own discretion*. If he happens to make the right choice, it is not because that choice is systematically and inescapably dictated by established astrological doctrine, but because the pattern's throbbing (the association with drums is deliberate – they too produce an altered state of consciousness) complexity invites him to open up to extrasensory information.

If this hypothesis is correct (it reflects my personal experience when successfully trying my hand at astrological divination as distinct from geomancy), astrology – despite its enormous elaboration as a mathematico-astronomical technique – yet *works* (in the positive sense of: may yet produce valid knowledge) on the same principles as mirror-gazing, the inspection of tea leaves and coffee dregs, the reading of cracks in a wall or in the soil, and cleromancy, including the *sangoma* oracle; it immerses the diviner in such a tangle of alternatives that only extrasensory perception provides an escape in the form of subjectively privileged alternatives.

Under such a model the basic idea of astrology may yet be salvaged to some extent, even if modern science cannot give support to the complex and detailed specificities of astrological calculational procedure. Astrology's basic idea can be summarised in four words:

‘As above, so below’.

This is the famous Hermetic adage, which first reached Western Europe in the Middle Ages in Roger Bacon's Latin translation as:

‘2. *Quod inferior superioribus et superiora inferioribus respondent.*
Quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius, et quod est superius est sicut est inferius.

¹ E.g. Watson 1973; Mitchell 1974; Piccardi 1962.

² Particularly impressive is: Seymour 1988; Seymour has a Ph.D. in astronomy.

Chapter 7

*Quodcunque inferius est simile est ejus quod est superius.
Inferiora hac cum superioribus illis, istaque cum iis vuicissim veres sociant.*¹

Although *sangoma* divination has, among others, a detectable astrological background in 'Abāssid Iraq around the turn of the second millennium CE,² the symbolic correspondences attaching to the sixteen different combinations which that divination system's four distinctively marked tablets can assume when thrown randomly, no longer carry any overt astrological signature in the consciousness of the diviners using that system. So *sangoma* divination has become different from astrology, and the empirical parapsychological studies on the very partial vindication of astrology cannot help us to claim, or disclaim, the validity of *sangoma* divination as a machine to generate valid knowledge independently. Neither have I statistical data on *sangoma* divination at my disposal: although the electronic methods to which I have resorted in the last few years do produce a detailed protocol for each session, the task of probing into the truth or untruth of the many statements made during one session alone would already be a substantial task, let alone if I could have done this for a sufficient number of sessions to warrant statistical analysis.

The aim of *sangoma* divination is primarily therapeutic: to reinsert the client in what may be argued to be her or his proper place in the universe, so that the life force in principle available for that person but temporarily blocked by their drifting away from the proper place, can flow once more. Under such assumptions, it would be almost impossible to turn the divination session into an experiment to find out the validity of the knowledge it produces. Such an attempt could harm clients in their spiritual and therapeutic pursuits, and alienate them.

However, in one recent case I have been fortunate to be able to collect all relevant information needed to assess the veracity of at least one *sangoma* session.³ The case involves an enthusiastic and impressed client of mature age and with a

¹ Bacon 1920: xlix. Although there is no evidence that Heraclitus engaged in astrology, this text appears to echo a saying attributed to that Presocratic philosopher:

‘the way up and the way down are one and the same’

(Tester 1989: 217; Tester does not provide a source for the Heraclitus quotation, which however derives from Hippolytus, *Refutatio*, ix, 9, Diels 22, B, 60; cf. Diels & Kranz 1951; de Raedemaeker 1953: 134). Flourishing in the early third century CE, Hippolytus may well have undergone Hermetic influence which thus may have come to be subsequently projected back, across more than half a millennium, onto Heraclitus. A similar corruption in the Heraclitic corpus was recently claimed in relation with an even more important fragment, no. 50, the one in which he is traditionally claimed to use the word *logos* (Vergeer 2000: 306f).

² Van Binsbergen, 1996e, 1996c.

³ *Sangoma* consultation intake form submitted in June, 2002; name and address and other personal details of the client known to me but not given here for reasons of privacy. I am greatly indebted to this client for his collaboration in this unique experiment. I solemnly declare that (apart from the use of pseudonyms) the true facts of the case are presented here, to the best of my ability, without deliberate additions or distortions that would unfairly strengthen my argument. Full and undisguised details are available for inspection in a protected document (to which bona fide visitors will receive the electronic entrance key upon request) to be accessed from: http://www.shikanda.net/Intercultural_Encounters.htm.

prior disappointing experience of initiation into West African diviner status as offered to him in his hometown (a major European city). The session was conducted on the basis of the minimum information provided on his electronic intake form, and, in the absence of this client, who before I received his intake form had been a total stranger to me. The results of this analysis are listed at length in Table 7.2 on the following pages.

	I: INTAKE	II: SESSION	III: CLIENT'S SPONTANEOUS FEEDBACK¹	IV: CLIENT'S SOLICITED FEEDBACK²
	Concrete information provided by client on my website's electronic intake form prior to the session	Concrete information coming up during the session and recorded in the session's protocol	Client's subsequent (post-session) spontaneous, unsolicited confirmation or rejection ³	Client's subsequent (post-session) solicited confirmation or rejection ⁴
0	date of electronic submission, and client's stated main question: 'My principal question is how can I utilise the spirits of my ancestors in a meaningful spiritual way, to help and heal others?'			
1	client's mother's name and whether she is still alive	'...the elderly woman, the mother probably, staying alone in the house ...'	spontaneously confirmed: client's mother is still alive, a widow since 1997	confirmed: 'This accurately describes my mother, a restless soul who does not like being alone, but has moved recently from relative opulence to a place that can best be described as adding to her loneliness. She does have a dog, however!'
2a	client's father's name but not whether he is still alive	'...it looks as if father is still alive but lives with another, younger woman ...'	rejected: client's father died in 1997	rejected but also confirmed up to a point. [In later correspondence I suggested to the client that from an ancestral perspective, this factually incorrect reading might yet be read as revealing a glimpse of the father's present condition in the afterlife:] 'This cannot obviously be objectively verified. Although he is dead, he did have a lost love of his life and was also generally treated with a certain contempt by his family. So, the implications seem accurate to me.'

¹ Phrases between quotation marks are literal quotations, with this proviso that in the protocol client's given name appears instead of the anonymous designation 'client', 'sister' has now been replaced by 'sibling' except the first time, and the actual place and country of residence have been obscured. '(...)' is a sign of editorial omission of text; '...' is not an indication of such omission but simply an indication that the recorded sentence continued across entries. Passages between brackets [] contain my own comments and summaries.

² As previous footnote.

³ In column III only those confirmations or rejections have been given which were contained in the client's spontaneous, unsolicited reactions to the protocol via e-mail, i.e. immediately after the oracular session had taken place in the absence of the client and the result had been written out and sent to him by e-mail.

⁴ In this column IV, phrases between quotation marks literally (though with some minimal editing) reproduce the client's solicited written feedback via e-mail upon the text in columns II and III.

Chapter 7

2b		‘...and is antagonistic with the son ...’		rejected: ‘I would say this is not true, and in general – and interestingly – the oracle reading was not in tune with the role of the father in my life. He was a very passive and withdrawn individual bossed around by my mother.’
3a		‘...there are indications that there is something missing in client’s family life ...’		confirmed: ‘The something missing is an accurate distillation of some essential emotional challenge. It is borne out by what follows. Family life – I have been divorced twice and only one of my three kids actually lives with me, and that only recently. So family life was missing, a huge ten-year chunk out of my life.’
3b		‘...and sex life, or that he has a sexually transmitted disease, perhaps AIDS ...’		rejected: ‘No sexual diseases and certainly not AIDS, so that was not appropriate.’
4a		‘...client has a twin ...’	confirmed: client has a twin sibling	confirmed: ‘Yes, this was and is accurate.’
4b		‘...sister ...’	rejected: client’s twin sibling is male; but see cell IV: 4b	wrong yet partially confirmed: ‘...as Fatima ¹ [client’s partner] keeps dreaming that my brother is bi-sexual, this subsequent reference to “sister” is a more revelatory observation than it would first seem.’
5		‘...client’s relationship with his twin sibling is characterised by rivalry specifically over the mother’s affection; in this rivalry the sibling has the upper hand ...’		confirmed: ‘Another impressive and sharp observation although the rivalry for affection in the adult life, at least, has long since given way to a distance from my part to both my mother and brother (I have one other brother too).’
6		‘...client does not get from his sibling and/or mother what he aspires to most ...’		largely confirmed : ‘This may well be true on a profound level of the psyche, but in my adult life I have moved on from this lack, and built a life without the desperate need for maternal love. But, as a deep truth, I would say it is accurate.’
7a		‘...client lost a lover, or was unable to develop a love relationship, ...’		confirmed: ‘I have been divorced twice and had many partners... but as each relationship has ended I guess this proves the point.’
7b		‘...because his life was being overshadowed by his mother (...) and sibling ...’		confirmed: ‘Not for me to judge, but I would accept this as feeling right.’
8		‘...the father has also been an important factor [in the loss of the beloved] ...’		rejected, see cell IV: 2b

¹ A pseudonym.

Sangoma divination: translatable to a global format, source of valid knowledge

9a		'...client's predicament really appears to lie in the shining attraction of a new partner ¹ ...'	confirmed: 'I have started a new relationship with a loving but difficult partner, very spiritual based, and she has very strong healing abilities, too. So that makes sense.'	confirmed: 'Yes, this does very well describe the new relationship. A reading done by the Tigrean ² <i>sangoma</i> ³ said a star was over our heads for the relationship, so shining attraction fits in well with this.'
9b	client's surname, postal address, e-mail address, country and community of birth and of 'home' (may be interpreted by the client as 'present residence' or as 'original ethnic home, origin')	'...from outside his family ...'	confirmed: client's family is autochthonous Western European White, the new partner is Black and from the African country of Tigre ⁴	
9c		'...no matter how treacherous and expensive she is ...'	phrasing too strong, but still: 'a loving but difficult partner'	largely but not totally rejected: 'Treacherous or expensive does not quite hit the spot, though. But events may prove otherwise. I think, however, in her life that F[atima; the new partner] has proven very loyal indeed. Let's see how this develops. Secretive too – as in her "secret" consultation with you.' ⁵
10		'...the new partner's name is associated with the tiger, ⁶ e.g. Tiger, Stripe, Leopard, etc ...'	confirmed: the girlfriend is from Tigre; moreover, in that country her great grandmother was the local head of a cultic society in which tiger imagery and paraphernalia played a major role; later information revealed that ancestors on the girlfriend's paternal side held similar offices	confirmed: 'Absolutely, and she also has the qualities of a tigress, too.'

¹ The new partner's gender was not disclosed, in other words there was no evidence during the session that the relationship is heterosexual; subsequently the client spontaneously sent comments on the protocol, and a picture, confirming that it was.

² A pseudonym.

³ The country of 'Tigre' (see cell III: 9b) is not situated in Southern Africa, and the word *sangoma* has no currency there. The client, conscious of addressing someone who identifies as a *sangoma*, applies the term *sangoma* in a generic sense of 'diviner-priest'.

⁴ A pseudonym.

⁵ A few days after I was approached by the present client, his partner approached me independently, asking for a consultation.

⁶ The identity of the animal species in question has been altered so as to protect the client's identity; the pseudonyms 'tiger' and 'Tigre' adequately mimic the original semantic and phonetic relationships. The substitution has its limits, though: there are no tigers (*Panthera tigris*) in Africa. As I will discuss *ad nauseam* in *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots*, other large feline species have a distribution in both Asia and Africa: *Panthera leo* (lion) and *Panthera pardus* (panther, leopard). The latter two names are no longer distinguished taxonomically; occasionally *Felis pardus* is used for this species. The cheetah however (a spotted feline with a dog-like body and a very small head), occurring both in Africa and in West Asia, is counted as a different species: *Acinonyx jubatus*. Cf. Wendt 1974; Grzimek 1974; Whitfield 1984.

11a		'...the tiger association is perhaps rather with the girl's/partner's mother ...'	confirmed by client: the girlfriend's mother is also from Tigre, and it is her grandmother who is indicated in cell III: 10	confirmed: 'No further comments on this. Her father was in fact minister in the Tigrean government, so obviously a strong Tigrean connection still.'
11b		'...or possibly (but improbably) with client's own mother ...'	most probably to be rejected: there is no tiger association in client's mother's first given name, but the matter has not been explored beyond that	
12		'...the girlfriend/partner will assist client on his spiritual path ...'	client notes a striking coincidence: his girlfriend already engages in forms of divination and healing; cf. client's comment in cell III: 9a	confirmed: 'Yes this feels absolutely right and has already happened'.
13a	background to main question as provided by client on electronic intake form: 'Last year, a "bundle" was placed in me by the spirits of the ancestors in a shamanic ceremony in Paris, France. ¹ I have dismissed the whole thing, but here I am on your site.' ²	in summary: client wanted 'only too eagerly' to establish contact with his ancestors during this session last year	the point of eagerness was initially rejected by the client's reference to his dismissive attitude: see column I: 13a. However, not only was the dismissal followed by renewed occult interest for which I was approached as a <i>sangoma</i> ; also the client later admitted (cell IV 13a-b) that his initial attitude was perfectly described as 'eagerness'	confirmed: 'The eagerness, on a lot of reflection, may be a little harsh but fair. What it does bring on was my subsequent negative contact ...'; but admittedly the eagerness was already clear from the intake form (cell I: 13a)
13b		in summary: that earlier spiritual episode involved cheats and impostors		confirmed: '...with an out and out impostor posing as an Orisha priest in Santeria, and a subsequent 'initiation' which really proved to be nothing. This was the eagerness and the folly it led to. I wanted to explore mediumship, as it had happened so strangely to me, and possession states. But I did it at the expense of common sense – and money.' This information was certainly not given with the intake form.
14		'...[client must] 'prepare a small shrine in the form of a large flat stone to be positioned somewhere near his house ...'	client notes a striking coincidence: 'We've just come back from [a holiday on the Isle of] Crete, bringing a big number of large flat stones! Interesting.'	confirmed as a coincidence: 'Yes, Crete stones are a coincidence'.

Table 7.2. An exhaustive analysis of the information input and output of a *sangoma* divination session.

The conclusion is obvious: on the basis of a bare minimum of information scarcely going beyond name and address, the *sangoma* divination turns out to produce, in this case at least, and in the hands of this particular diviner, the most

¹ As names of client's home city and country, these are pseudonyms.

² *Sc.* the website where my electronic *sangoma* consultation form is being made available.

amazing details of correct biographical information, which could not possibly be derived from the minimum information offered at intake, yet was very largely confirmed by the client in two rounds of commentary:


- (a) at first spontaneously, in enthusiastic response to the written protocol of the session conducted in his absence and in a different country, and subsequently
- (b) deliberately solicited, in order to include in the analysis not only those verified items which the client had found most spectacular or had rejected explicitly, but also those items on which he had not spontaneously commented in the first round.

This detailed analysis establishes beyond doubt that, in this case and in my hands, *sangoma* divination is an independent source of valid empirical knowledge. As such it adds tremendously to the authority of the *sangoma*'s spiritual and psychological advice, which by virtue of the authority thus established often provides an otherwise utterly perplexed client with the Archimedean fixed point needed to lever his life onto a more positive course; and it also reinforces the *sangoma* himself in his own role and in a confident application of his skills, insights and intuitions.


7.6. Discussion

Let us now take a detailed look at the session excerpted in Table 7.2, in an attempt to identify the mechanisms that allow the *sangoma* oracle to be an independent source of valid knowledge.


As always the point where things go wrong is the most instructive. When processing the client's intake form, I was under the impression that for reasons unknown to me, the form had not recorded the answer to the question whether client's father was still alive. The oracular session was conducted by me while I was consciously aware that I did not know whether the father was dead or still alive. Only when writing this analysis, two months later, did I find out what really happened: the electronic intake form was so constructed that only if a client checked the box for 'father still alive', the answer would be included in the data set subsequently to be submitted to me electronically. If the box was left unchecked, the line in question would not appear among the intake data, as in this client's case; and whereas I took this to mean 'no information for inexplicable reasons', in fact it meant 'father is dead'. When I asked the oracle whether the client's father was still alive, the combination that came up was:

Ntakwala , i.e. 'the daughter; the young woman; brilliance; money'.

However, the peripheral counter (a cowry shell) that was thrown simultaneously with the four tablets, came out closed, and hence I was persuaded to let *Ntakwala* be largely overshadowed by its converse where the tablets appear in opposite position:

Vuba (= ‘mixed, ambiguous’): 

Therefore I was led to conclude that in some ambiguous manner the father might still be alive and involved with a young woman. This reading, while factually incorrect from the perspective of the living, from an ancestral perspective could also be construed as revealing a glimpse of the father’s present condition in the afterlife. In cell IV: 2a the client’s agreement with such an interpretation is recorded. As so often in the *sangoma* oracular practice an inversion may be involved here. In the *sangoma* world view the condition of the ancestors is the opposite of that of the living, according to the adage accompanying the combination:

Mpululu (= ‘ululating’):  : ‘Bereavement in this world means happiness in the next’.

Hence, for example, *sangomas* administer at their shrines, take sacrificial snuff, etc. with their left hand, even though among the living the right hand is privileged by Southern African etiquette. As if to corroborate this reading in terms of inversion, in this session the next throw after *Ntakwala* was to yield *Mpululu*.¹ But on second thoughts the client’s agreement with the diviner’s vision of the father’s comforts in the afterlife suggests a better way to interpret the ambiguity which the oracle stressed: in a way the father is still alive in the sense that because the son has throughout his life, and also after the father’s death, identified with him (cf. Table 7.2, cell IV: 2b), the son’s current new love may be said to reflect, and to compensate for, the lost love his father is known to have cherished while still alive. A typical *sangoma* interpretation would go even further and would consider the son to be possessed by his deceased father’s spirit, who through the body of his living son tries to find the amorous satisfaction that was denied to him in his own life. But such a reading, which upon re-inspection of the protocol turns out to have been technically possible given the sequential fall of the tablets, was not considered at all during the session.

Not spotting the son’s consistent identification with the father as a (fellow-) victim of the mother, constituted this oracular session’s major failure, although the antagonistic role of the mother did come out very well and was confirmed by the client. Perhaps my own autobiographical preoccupation with a sinister father has prevented me from correctly grasping the oracular message. That the client has no

¹ Other examples of such inversion concern the gender of client’s twin sibling (cf. Table 7.1, rows 4a and 4b), and the undisclosed gender of the client’s new love, in the same Table.

problem depicting the father in afterlife in a happy relationship with a younger woman while leaving the client's mother a desperately lonely widow, suggests that the client's eager search for spiritual and occult progress, enabling him to make contact with the ancestors, is but a continued attempt to reach the father, even though the latter is dead now. But while all this may be true at the conscious and subjective level, and while the father's being dead is a firm fact, yet the oracle's reading to the effect that the father has thwarted the son's love life may be vindicated at a more objective level. The role model of a hen-picked father may well have led the client's love relationships to shipwreck (which is what the oracle claims), even though consciously and subjectively the relationship with the father may appear to the son to have been far from antagonistic, but on the contrary one of far-reaching identification.

The fact that the oracle was unable to produce a proper reading on the father being alive or dead merely or largely because the diviner, being me, had misread the intake form, and has a hang-up about fathers anyway, clearly shows that at least in part the oracle's pronouncements are based on the conscious contents of the diviner's mind, and that these conscious contents may eclipse more correct information which, at the same time, is certainly available outside the diviner's mind: in the client's mind, in the minds of other people who have known the deceased, and in the universe at large, where every event and condition, if it is to be verifiable at all, necessarily leaves traces. Moreover, the correct information ('father is dead') was implied on the electronic intake form, which however was not available as an electronic document on the computer on which I did the consultation.

The above eclipsing effected by the diviner's conscious mind in combination with subconscious transference on the part of the diviner, is undoubtedly one of the mechanisms involved in *sangoma* divination. However, most of the verifiably correct information produced in the session has to come from outside the diviner's conscious mind: in the latter, no previous knowledge of this utterly unknown client was available beyond the information contained on the intake form, and the probability of correctly guessing all the many objectively correct items of Table 7.2 is extremely small.

Let us press this point. Since one in every eighty births is of twins, the probability of correctly guessing – if guessing were involved – that an otherwise unknown client has a twin is one in eighty, i.e. 1.25%.¹ Incidentally, the probability of the client having a living twin is considerably smaller, for as the client's unknown age progresses, so does the chance that the twin is no longer alive, but that is not the point here. Since the word 'partner' can include any more or less exclusive and more or less sexual relationship of unspecified duration, and since having a partner is the social norm for adults, the probability of correctly guessing that a client, of unknown age but probably an adult who moreover by his given name is identifiable as male,

¹ Anonymous 1975b.

would consider himself to have a partner, may be as high as 75%. Teenagers and very young adults (people likely to have first partners not qualifying to be called ‘new’ partners) only constitute about one quarter of the total age range of post-childhood males. Moreover male adults who have stuck to their first partner are known to form a minority in contemporary North Atlantic urban society, and so the probability of correctly guessing, under all these uncertain conditions, that the current partner is not the first partner, while the partner qualifies as ‘new’ (even if that partner succeeded the predecessor years ago) could be estimated at about 65%. Thus the probability of correctly guessing, without any further information, that the client has both a twin and a new partner, is about

$$(0.0125)*(0.75)*(0.65),$$

or about 0.6%. In other words, if the outcome of the session on these points were merely due to chance, one would have to conduct more than 165 divination sessions in order to produce one and only one session with such an outcome. And this only accounts for three correct and verifiable items of information, whereas Table 7.2 lists many more.

What then is the source of this correct information? Since I am using the client’s conscious autobiographical knowledge as a control in Table 7.2, all post-session confirmation in columns III and IV comes from the client. Therefore, one obvious explanation for the correct information independently produced by the divination session is that the technique of *sangoma* divination gives the diviner access to the client’s mind, enabling the former telepathically to pick the mind of the latter (whom the *sangoma* has never seen, who resides in another country, and the only contact with whom has been in the form of one short pre-coded intake form). The emphasis here is on the conscious layers of the client’s mind, but occasionally also probing into the subconscious layers, as, for example, in the present case when filial resentment vis-à-vis the mother and strong sibling rivalry were correctly detected, but to the client’s somewhat surprised agreement.

The attractiveness of this telepathic explanatory model, although strongly suggested by Table 7.2, may yet in itself be an artefact of the self-imposed censorship that has informed the construction of that table. For here, out of the much more extensive contents of the oracular protocol, deliberately only such objective items of knowledge have been selected as are amenable to empirical verification by means of sensory observation. With the exception of the reference to the flat stone from which an ancestral shrine is to be made, all references to ancestral injunction, ancestral wrath, witchcraft, prescribed rituals towards ancestral propitiation, etc. have been omitted from the table because, pertaining to a discourse that would obviously not have currency in North Atlantic scientific circles, it would be beside the point of demonstrating the *sangoma* oracle’s independent production of empirically valid knowledge.

If an appeal to telepathy in this connection is permissible, I submit that the same could be said for psychokinesis. There is now a substantial body of evidence to the effect that natural processes can be subtly influenced by the human mind, albeit only

in infinitesimally subtle ways. Already over a decade ago an authoritative physics journal cited more than 800 published professional references dealing with this effect.¹ During virtually every real-life divination session using real tablets, I have the impression, once or twice in the succession of throws, of actively producing that particular fall of the tablets that would be most appropriate and easiest to interpret at that point in the unfolding narrative; yet before each throw the tablets are carefully shuffled in my two hands cupped together, and to the best of my awareness foul play is ruled out. Among *sangomas* this effect is considered absolutely commonplace. At every throw, the probability² of a particular combination coming up is as small as 1/16 or 6.25%. Now *sangomas* receive specific training (essentially consisting in being told that it can be done, and being forced to practice throwing their tablets for several hours every day, week after week and month after month) so as to produce desired combinations with a much higher frequency than a mere 6.25% – in other words: to throw, without cheating, more or less what they want or hope to throw. It is my impression (although unsupported by statistical evidence and not scrutinised with standard parapsychological methods e.g. involving the professional opinion of an experienced theatre magician), that (like myself) many of my fellow-*sangomas* have more or less mastered this ability. The extensive manipulation of the tablets (tossing them repeatedly up and down above two hands cupped next to each other with palms upwards; shaking them in one's closed cupped hands; and blowing upon them) is considered essential – as if the *sangoma* and the client impart onto the tablets some sort of invisible fluidum surrounding their body, and thus draw these objects into a medium through which they can be more or less controlled in space.

Also in practically every electronic *sangoma* divination session I have the equivalent experience: that the computer's random generator produces, as the next throw, precisely the combination I would expect, or would have the best use for, considering the direction of the protocol's unfolding narrative so far. Needless to say that the random generator is supposed to be absolutely independent from my mind: it consists of a built-in seeder function activated by the computer's built-in timer function.³ A simple programming subroutine, written by me, converts the many possible different outcomes of the random generator into sixteen neatly distinguished equiprobable cohorts, with one specific oracular combination being uniquely assigned to each cohort. The exact moment in time, measured in nanoseconds, that the Enter button is pressed will ultimately determine the seeder number with which the generator is sown, and thus will determine which of the sixteen combinations comes up; but because the user's conscious psychology and the attending retention relaxation times are of the order of magnitude, not of 10^{-9} seconds, but of 10^{-1} seconds, which is incomparably larger, the user has absolutely no conscious control over that precise moment – within any consciously registered lapse of time already

¹ Radin & Nelson 1989; cf. Bierman 1993.

² The calculation is on the basis of replication, of course, for the next throw uses again the same four tablets.

³ Microsoft 1988.

millions of different seeders are available for production, i.e. any of the sixteen combinations, but it would be absolutely impossible to develop a conscious technique for choosing the right nanosecond moment. One would speak of psychokinesis¹ in this connection, if, *irrespective* of the actual exact moment of pressing the Enter button, yet *that* particular seeder would be produced by the computer as would yield the desired or expected combination. One would also speak of psychokinesis if, regardless of any regular and completely random production of a particular seeder number, the computer would be able to ignore the programmed algorithm leading from that seeder number to an integer between 1 and 16 (and thus to a particular combination), and would instead bring up the consciously desired combination. When it comes to influencing computational processes in a microcomputer, the ‘material bodies’ involved in such spatial displacement would be electrons; since these might also – ever since the Huygens–Newton controversy – be considered energy waves, the postulated effect amounts to an effect of thought on energy waves: as if the computer were telepathic vis-à-vis the human user’s expectations and desires.

There is an alternative paranormal interpretation for situations like this, where the diviner has the impression of deliberately bringing up (with real tablets or virtually, with a computerised random generator) the exact combination that fits that point in the divination session: in terms of subconscious precognition² instead of psychokinesis. Under the precognition hypothesis, the diviner does not control the fall of the real or virtual tablets at all but, through extrasensory means, is informed in advance of what the next throw will be, and this precognition is subsequently, inadvertently, turned into an expectation or a desire. Yet the fact that the desire for a particular combination is systematically dictated by the unfolding consistent narrative of the session as a whole, would favour a telekinetic explanation rather than one in terms of precognition.

Beside the telepathic model which sees the client’s mind as the source of verifiable correct information coming up in the divination session, one could formulate as yet another alternative explanation a cosmic model, hypothesising that the diviner is picking up clues, not from individual person’s mind, but from the impersonal natural world as a whole. Once again: every verifiable condition or event leaves traces in the natural world – it is on these very traces that verifiability depends in the first place. For instance, if the client’s father is dead, that means that his body

¹ Psychokinesis may be defined as: effecting spatial displacement on material bodies without any empirically detectable intermediary.

² On the parapsychology of precognition, cf. Brier 1974; Brier & Schmidt-Raghavan 1982; Eisenbud 1982; Mundle 1964; Rhine *et al.* 1938; Roy 1982; Woodruff & Rhine 1942; Tenhaeff 1980. From an African philosophical perspective, cf. Hebga 1998. Perhaps the most persuasive model formulated to account for such phenomena has been Walker’s (1974, 1977) quantum mechanical theory of precognition. Of course, paranormal precognition has to be clearly distinguished from ordinary prediction, whose mechanisms are studied by mainstream psychology and whose formal conditions constitute a corner-stone of the philosophy of science: de Finetti 1937; Nisbett & Borgida 1975; Olin 1983; Quine 1953a; Reichenbach 1938; Salmon 1981.

tissue is or has been decomposing, that many or most of the atoms once constituting his body have now found a new context, and that the detectable, localised spatial gradients of this process (for example a faint and fading discoloration of the soil where his body has decomposed) encode it in such a way as to contain unequivocal information on the person's death, ready to be decoded by any information-processing organism that comes along: not just the diviner (or his mind), but also animal and vegetal organism (rodents, moles, worms, bugs, fungi, bacteria, etc.) attracted by and participating in this process of transformation, C¹⁴ atoms decaying radioactively in dead tissue and no longer replaced by metabolic exchange with the living surrounding world, etc.¹ Therefore, that these clues are available throughout the empirical world is not in doubt; the question is how the diviner is able to perceive and interpret them without physically leaving his room. Under the cosmic model one might hypothesise that the diviner's mind is capable of making contact (by extrasensory means) with these information-loaded traces scattered throughout the material world, and interpret their contents without the intervention of any personal mind except his own. In the latest decades, this idea has received much attention particularly as a result of the writings of Rupert Sheldrake.²

From the *sangoma* point of view, meanwhile, the explanation in terms of diviner–client telepathy or the diviner's receptivity to objective information circulating in the universe, would not necessarily be denied but it would be reformulated in ancestral terms. In the *sangoma* discourse, it is the ancestors (the diviner's, the client's, or both) who manifest themselves as the knowing agent in the *sangoma* oracle, and of course these ancestors would know all about the client's life, not only when it comes to readily verifiable facts such as listed in column II of Table 7.2, but also the hidden details which *sangomas* consider to be far more significant, concerning the client's relation with the ancestral world.

According to the *sangoma* ideology it is particularly the use of consecrated tablets, washed in the blood of the sacrificial animals at the height of the *sangoma*'s personal graduation ceremony, that renders the oracle a valid source of ancestral knowledge. As a practicing *sangoma* I am inclined to take this interpretation with a pinch of salt. In 1989, just before her death, I received a set of dummy tablets from our then spiritual leader MmaNdlovu. They were only to be consecrated in sacrificial blood at my graduation under MmaChakayile's direction in 1991. In the intermediate period they were only occasionally washed in the season's first rain (held to be a powerful medicine since the High God, Mwali, is primarily a bringer of rain), and in

¹ Perhaps the idea of traces left behind by a deceased person also means that remnants of 'his disembodied soul' (which is – Gonda 1943: 84f – the original meaning of the Sanskrit word *karma*, now a household word in the North Atlantic region) may continue to cling onto places he has frequented in life, onto his grave and onto the minds of his loved ones and others who are still alive; but while many apparently well-documented cases of haunting by deceased people would suggest such a hypothesis (cf. Tenhaeff 1971; Zorab 1949), we do not need it to make our present point.

² Sheldrake 1981, 1988, 1996; Sheldrake *et al.* 2001.

commercially packaged¹ ritual fat not derived from my own animal victims. Yet in these intermediate years the tablets performed so well as divinatory apparatus that only at my graduation, when they received the full treatment, I suddenly realised that until then they must have been mere dummies. Of course, if effective divination depends on the use of a consecrated divinatory apparatus, it is not obvious that a computer would do equally well; but if the apparatus is merely the means to create, through random or not so random throws, a confusing, throbbing complexity on which the diviner's mind can subsequently work (selectively using extrasensory knowledge), then the computer could be just as effective, and in my experience it is.

Not all Southern African diviners are spirit mediums, i.e. *sangomas*; many simply engage in divination as an information technology involving the use of a set of tablets or 'bones', without relying on markedly altered states of consciousness. In the previous chapters we encountered one such 'technical' diviner in the person of Mr Smarts Gumede, my principal teacher of the Southern African divination system. These diviners usually legitimate their practice by an ancestral dispensation, manifested earlier in life by severe illness, temporary death, dreams or visions, but not by reference to a state of trance in which an ancestor is supposed to descend into the diviner's body and speak through his mouth. The unmistakable parallels between Southern African and West African divination (*Ifa*) are most striking in the case of the Southern African 'technical diviners', for also *Ifa* is a near-mathematical technique not involving altered states of consciousness. For Southern Africa, the frame of mind is well described by Willoughby, the early missionary of the Botswana Kalanga:

'In our eyes the random throw of a diviner's 'bones', or the chance pose of a round-bottomed pot or a few bits of stick, look for all the world like a hazard of dice, a turn of the cards, the tossing of a coin, or the drawing of lots – practices which have long been shorn of such religious significance as they once possessed in Europe;² but if we are to judge the Bantu fairly, still more if we are to help them to scale the steep acclivity of human achievement, we must open our eyes to the fact that they see no element of chance in the soothsayer's professional operations. The diviner claims that he arrives at his findings by definite and intricate rules, and that the tools of his trade are merely mechanical devices, like the planchette of European spiritualists, for discovering the minds of the spirits.'³

In our many conversations in the years 1988-1992 Mr Gumede repeatedly claimed that the *sangomas*' proper form of divination was exclusively through trance revelation, and that their use of the four-tablet oracle, i.e. a form of cleromancy (divination by lots), amounted to a recent appropriation. These technical diviners tend to rely not only on their material oracular apparatus but also on specific

¹ In South Africa and Botswana there is a local industry producing and distributing nicely packaged traditional medicines, both from the African and from the Afrikaner tradition. These commodities have penetrated the practices of traditional healers to a considerable extent. Cf. Heilbron 1999.

² The Romans believed that the lots were guided by ancestral spirits as well as by the gods. [Willoughby's original note.]

³ Willoughby 1928: 148. Original references to Smith & Dale 1920: I 270, and Callaway 1870: 348.

conventionalised praises which they address to their tutelary spirit, their apparatus, and to each specific combination that comes up when the tablets or bones are cast. Older studies of Southern African divination offer extensive lists of such praises.¹ The same situation obtains in West African *Ifa* divination.² However, such praises are not a standard part of *sangoma* divination as practised at the Francistown lodges in the late twentieth century CE.

When reformulating the *sangoma* system towards a format suitable for mediation and recognition on a worldwide basis, the cultural specificity of the notion of ‘ancestors’ may be expected to pose a major obstacle. Elaborately institutionalised ancestor veneration occurs in sub-Saharan Africa and in East and South-east Asia, but despite the cult of family graves, the reading of masses of the dead, the celebration of All Souls’ Day, etc., it cannot be properly said to be a feature of contemporary North Atlantic culture or of the emerging global culture that is based on the latter regional culture. Now, although the *sangomas* take their references to ‘the ancestors’ literally, for a global audience among whom the notion of ancestors and their power is not generally present, we have no choice but to translate this notion towards a global audience in terms of a metonymical expression for the sum total of conditions that have led to the present moment in the client’s life. These conditions do involve the minutiae of the client childhood and adult life, social relations, etc., but also the Big Bang, the subsequent condensation and expansion of the universe, the formation and explosion of novae and supernovae in which the higher chemical elements (beyond hydrogen and helium) were formed without which planets, life, humankind, would have been impossible, subsequently the formation of the earth, the emergence of life, the vagaries of the path of life’s evolution across a billion years, the emergence finally of humankind, of the Neolithic Age, the Iron Age, the history of a nation, of a family Viewed thus the oracle claims to address the entire network of causality in essence spanning the entire universe, in the centre of which the client with his predicament finds himself. Such a reformulation of the concept of ancestors does two things that may go some way towards explaining why *sangoma* therapy is effective. It reminds us of the fact that many problems in a person’s life stem from the selective acceptance and repression of the past – some aspects of the past are simply so painful that we cannot face them, and instead warp our lives and personalities around ignoring them or compensating for them. Even if the information content of the *sangoma* oracle comes mainly or exclusively from the client’s subconscious and not from the universe at large, then this readdressing and re-articulation of the past is likely to be immensely important and powerful as a redressive therapeutic tool. And if we are allowed to think beyond the client’s individuality and may entertain the thought that in fact the whole causal web of the universe is reflected in *sangoma* divination, then we have as a second factor towards

¹ Coertze 1931; de Jager & Seboni 1964; Dornan 1923; Eiselen 1932; Garbutt 1909; Giesekke 1930; Hunt 1950, 1954, 1962; Junod 1925, 1927; Laydevant 1933; Roberts 1915; Watt & van Warmelo 1930.

² Bascom 1969, 1980; Maupoil 1943b.

the effectiveness of *sangoma* therapy the fact that the client, whatever his personal worries and repressed pain may be, is yet reconfirmed as a part of the universe, of the All – as that part which, by being human, by lending conscious thought and reflexivity to the universe, constitutes its highest known achievement. And also this thought is immensely reassuring and comforting in the face of anxiety and pain. Yet if *sangoma* divination is truly about cosmic causality and cosmic identification, the specifically *ancestral* discourse in which the protocol is cast would have to be considered contingent and epiphenomenal, capable of being replaced by any other discourse, for example, by one claiming that in the oracle it is not the ancestors who speak, but God, Nature, the Universe, Gaia, the diviner consciously playing the role of spiritual advisor, the diviner's subconscious, the client's subconscious, the collective consciousness of the client's family, of his ethnic group, of his nation, of humankind as a whole, or all of these.

Again one could ask: but if – as claimed by the *sangomas* – the ultimate knowledge source of the oracle is the omniscient ancestors or any other similarly omniscient repository of knowledge referred to in an ancestral idiom, why then should the session's content of verifiable knowledge not be 100% correct; why should it contain flaws precisely where the diviner in his conscious mind was misinformed, or where the diviner engages in transference on the basis of a personal autobiographical affect (for example in the domain of father–son relations)?

Regardless of which culturally-embedded model we would use for the explanation of the *sangoma* oracle's partial veridicity, this question has an obvious and non-problematic answer in the light of the uncertainty which is a corner stone of quantum mechanics: error must be accepted as a matter of course, as a condition which sustains our model instead of upsetting it.¹

However, we could try to be more specific that that. If we accept the partial eclipsing of valid information by the diviner's conscious mind as a convincing explanation for error in the case of the telepathic model, the same explanation would be admissible for the cosmic model or the ancestral model. The point is that the correct information available out there is not provided directly, but through the medium of the divination session, which means dependence on the (in principle, random) fall of the tablets, as well as on the diviner's creative freedom to interpret each fall according to a number of complementary dimensions (ancestors, witchcraft, social relation, animals, wealth, health, etc.). The diviner is at liberty to select whatever dimension appears to his conscious mind to be the most appropriate at a particular point in the sequence of throws that make up the session, as the coherent narrative of the protocol is being constructed step by step with each consecutive throw. The diviner with his personal preoccupations and his freedom of choice constitutes a powerful filter that could never produce a 100% correct rendering even if the input of objective empirical facts were 100% correct to begin with.

¹ Cf. Einstein *et al.* 1931.

From the *sangoma* point of view the ancestral model would have the advantage that it posits complete continuity between the verifiable facts about the client's life, and the pronouncements in ancestral and witchcraft terms that offer the client a coherent narrative – cast in ancestral terms – of his predicament, as well as the ritual and conceptual tools to address his predicament actively. Saturated with recognisably true factual details, the client is increasingly persuaded that the ancestral overall narrative in ancestral terms is also correct, and thus the client is brought to reinterpret his predicament as no longer absurd, undeserved, unsolvable, utterly destructive, hopeless, etc., but as consistent and as amenable to improvement along clearly defined ritual lines.

Under the telepathic model, the autobiographical facts play the same role of enhancing the authority of the oracle's interpretation of the client's situation, and its directions for ritual redress. But since this model situates the source of authority and information not outside the client but in the client's subconscious, the authority thus constructed is far more relative. It may even be relegated to the mere expression of repressed desires and anxieties. However, the client is usually more impressed by the objective autobiographical information than that the thought of this information being tapped telepathically for his own subconscious could completely destroy the oracle's authority as regards spiritual interpretation and therapeutic directions. For after all, the oracle thus offers the means of bringing out and objectifying elements that have gone hidden in the subconscious for a long time and that may have had a pernicious effect on the client's life and happiness.

So we have at least three alternative models to explain why *sangoma* divination could be a source of valid knowledge:

- (1) the telepathic model
- (2) the cosmic model, and
- (3) the ancestral model.

Whichever of these three models we adopt in order to explain the flow of valid information in the *sangoma* divinatory session, an inevitable tenet of the *sangoma* world view is the porous nature of the individual mind and in particular of the diviner's mind. While the dominant paradigm of the natural sciences and of the philosophy of mind in the North Atlantic region cannot accommodate the idea of such porousness, it has been a recurrent theme in Western thought, from Plotinus in Late Antiquity to Poortman in the twentieth century CE.¹ In African thought the mind's porousness is, for instance, a central theme in the world view of the Akan peoples, where the All-Spirit is held to extend to any individual soul, thus constituting a medium by which these souls can interpenetrate.²

¹ Poortman 1978.

² Gyekye 1995; Müller 2002.

Either directly (under the telepathic and the cosmic model) or indirectly, under the ancestral model (where the ancestors are supposed to act as intermediaries between knowledge out there and the diviner's mind) the diviner's mind (as author of the session's proceedings) turns out to contain far more than has been consciously stored into it through sensory perception; it is held to be in constant open extrasensory communication with the world (the client's mind, the cosmos, the ancestors) outside the diviner's mind. *Sangomahood* constitutes, among other things, a mental technology to enhance that openness towards the outside world to such an unusually high level that amazing feats of valid knowledge acquisition become possible without sensory perception.¹

The deliberate unfocusing away from the here and now and from the pressures of sensorialist rationality is a difficult and subtle process, for which *sangoma* training offers the mental technology (but of course many other spiritual traditions all over the world offer the same). The principal difficulty springs from the inevitable contradiction between unfocusing, on the one hand, and, on the other, the *will to* unfocus – a will which tends to trigger the very sensorialist rationality one seeks to escape from. Thus, in the course of the session the diviner is constantly switching from a mode of unfocused and uncensored telepathic and cosmic receptivity, to conscious and active rationality; in the latter mode he speaks to the client, casts the tablets, formulates coherent questions and interpretations, and therefore during the total duration of the session the diviner finds himself much more often in the controlled rational mode than in the unfocused mode. In the controlled mode only so little valid knowledge can come through extrasensorily that it can be safely neglected, as it usually is in North Atlantic everyday life. If our dreams, induced trances, near-death experiences, etc. occasionally yield valid extrasensory knowledge it is because the mind is also unfocused in these situations and the censorship of sensorialist rationality is turned off. During a divination session, when the controlled mode constantly alternates with, and intrudes into, the unfocused moments before the latter's conscious and explicit interpretation, the diviner's sensorialist rationality will eclipse all independent extrasensory valid knowledge; what the diviner then brings up in interpretation of a particular throw is merely a combination of

- (a) what he has explicitly been given to know about the client through ordinary sensory means, and
- (b) what he has learned about the explicit meanings and associations of the sixteen combinations.

¹ A recent breakthrough in prehistoric archaeology has been the idea, pioneered by Lewis-Williams, that Upper Palaeolithic rock art may in essence have aimed at the production of psychedelic devices producing altered states of consciousness – in which, as my argument in this chapter suggests, the extrasensory transfer of knowledge, between generations but also between human carriers of knowledge separated in space and time, is much more likely to occur (Lewis-Williams 1997a, 1997b; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988, 1989). For an extensive discussion of the (relatively limited) relevance of South African rock art for an understanding of *sangomahood*, cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

Under such conditions of the eclipse of unfocusing (which can be expected to prevail among learner diviners, but are impossible to avoid totally even in an experienced diviner's sessions) valid extrasensory knowledge can scarcely come through, and the readings produced have no more than the ordinary, infinitesimally small, statistical chance of corresponding with verifiable facts.

This contradiction is also the reason why nothing is to be expected from a public test of the powers of *sangomahood* before a formal meeting of North Atlantic researchers, as proposed by Jos van der Klei.¹ In an explicit test situation marked by professional and peer-group challenge and contention, it is nearly impossible to unfocus to such an extent that the subtle extrasensorialist powers which are *in principle* available in *sangomahood*, can actually be mobilised then and there. This is a recurrent theme in parapsychological research: the paranormal capabilities are demonstrable statistically but cannot be summoned instantly and at will, and hence retain a high degree of unpredictability – they are *chaotic* in the technical sense of modern chaos theory. Such unpredictability is by no means a feature peculiar to paranormal phenomena. In that respect they are eminently comparable to nuclear decay: given a macroscopic quantity – say 2 grams – of radioactive material, on the basis of the specific half-life of that material one can predict fairly precisely how much will have decayed after a specific lapse of time; but one can never predict which individual nucleus will decay and when.

In the history of prophetism we find numerous demonstrations of a related phenomenon: prophets' reluctance to give instant demonstrations of their powers, from Jesus declaring

‘blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed’²

to the Dutch prophet Lou de Palingboer (Lou the Eel-Monger) of the 1950s, who when challenged

‘Lou, do perform a miracle for us’

is reputed to have answered:

‘It is not that I can't do it, but I just won't’.

However, many prophets, diviners and medium are less honest, and, finding it embarrassing to have their, genuine, paranormal powers doubted, cannot resist the temptation to fake what they know they cannot produce at will; the history of parapsychology is full of such fakes and frauds, but often in combination with genuine paranormal powers.

Thus we have identified inevitable failures in unfocusing as a major source of error in the *sangoma* oracle. Other sources of error are more incidental and easier to


¹ During the symposium which he and Reini Raatgever organised in 1998, to mark my departure from the Free University in order to take up the chair of intercultural philosophy in Rotterdam.

² John 20: 29.

avoid, for example, when the diviner overlooks a certain implication or association of a combination otherwise acknowledged within the *sangoma* system. It may also happen that the diviner is so pleased with a particular narrative line that develops in the course of the interpretation of a number of successive throws, that the next throw is interpreted along the same line, ignoring the possibility that this throw introduced a totally new dimension – but this type of error simply serves as illustration of the controlled mode overtaking the unfocused mode.

In my experience the admixture of correct and wrong verifiable information in a *sangoma* divination session varies considerably from session to session. Repeating a familiar finding in parapsychology,¹ it is not so much deliberate concentration on the part of the diviner that produces the hits (for such concentration activates the filter of sensorialist rationality), nor an exalted sense of self-confident infallibility based on professional accomplishment or supernatural assistance and election, but a relaxed, lightly interested, confident atmosphere bordering on the playful, assisting the unfocusing of the *sangoma*'s mind.

We have seen how unintended misinformation that is stored in the diviner's conscious mind, but also his own autobiographical traumas as more or less consciously acknowledged (transference, in other words), may severely obstruct the free flow of correct information into his own conscious mind from wherever outside it. Part of the sessions' variability in veridicity also seems to relate to characteristics on the client's part. For instance, the immensely successful extrasensory transfer of valid objective knowledge in the case recorded in Table 7.2 is probably related to that client's extensive personal experience with other divinatory and shamanic settings and his eagerness – as detected during the session, and as reluctantly admitted in response to a specific question to this effect – to personally acquire divinatory and shamanic skills, hence unmitigated (and somewhat blinding) admiration for the diviner's apparently superior powers. Cosmic extrasensory receptivity (or, under the telepathic model, diviner–client extrasensory rapport) may be rather more limited in a case where the client is very sceptical – although I have known such situations to produce excellent and convincing sessions capable of impressing the client and bringing out hidden dilemmas and desires that subsequently could be consciously addressed for the first time. I suspect such receptivity/*rapport* to be at its lowest if a client approaches the oracle with a sham question that does not represent enough of an existential need to mobilise the diviner's mental resources to their maximum extent. In such cases the following combination may come up frequently in the session:

Mashangula  : “there is no information, the client is erasing the problem”.

¹ Tenhaeff n.d.

Combining in myself the roles of *sangoma* and North Atlantic intellectual, it is not necessary for me to choose between the telepathic, the cosmic, and the ancestral model. All three models are centrally constructed around what reductionist North Atlantic religious anthropology, and North Atlantic science in general, would never have been prepared to admit but what now seems an inescapable conclusion: the capability of the *sangoma* oracular procedures to extrasensorily, and massively, tap sources of valid knowledge that would remain closed by ordinary means of sensory perception. *Sangomahood* thus has implications far beyond the occasional administration of psychotherapeutic counselling in specific settings in Southern Africa and worldwide via the Internet – even though such counselling can be considered a major achievement in itself on the part of *sangomahood* as an African institution. It is immaterial whether the literal ancestral interpretation that is central to Southern African *sangomahood* can properly survive the translation of *sangoma* knowledge-generating procedures into a globalised format acceptable in the North Atlantic region. The telepathic or cosmic explanations are probably more in line with the thrust of current North Atlantic collective representations, although it is remarkable that those of my clients who are native to the North Atlantic region have generally, and without further comment, accepted, and adopted in their own expressions, the ancestral idiom as a long-sought revelation. But whatever explanatory model we prefer, we will have to admit that the knowledge-generating procedures of *sangomahood* reveal significant aspects of the structure of the world, of humankind, and of human knowledge: the fact that the human mind is so porous that it can gather valid knowledge through extrasensory means. This is a factuality which – outside the contentious domain of parapsychology – has not been explicitly acknowledged, in theory, nor mastered, in practice, by North Atlantic science, let alone by the stereotyping scientific collective representations deriving from the latter.

The reader might expect that I would now proceed to unfold a theory about the physical and mental mechanism providing a coherent description and explanation of the amazing forms of extrasensory production of valid knowledge at hand in the *sangoma* oracle. Thanks to the developments in parapsychology in the past two decades there are now a number of well-articulated, sophisticated theories to choose from, notably Sheldrake's theory of morphogenetic fields, which claims

‘ubiquitous extrasensory information transfer’¹

throughout nature; and the theory of non-locality, which is based on Bell's formal analysis of quantum mechanics in the light of the Einstein–Podolsky–Rosen (EPR) paradox, and allowing for simultaneous effects between bodies regardless of their distance from one another in space.² While Sheldrake may be a rebellious and

¹ Ertel 1991.

² Bell 1964, 1987; Josephson & Viras 1991; Walker 1974, 1977; Bohm 1980; Bohm & Hiley 1993.

initially isolated biologist whose 1981 book (*A New Science of Life*) was reviewed¹ in the authoritative journal *Nature* as

‘the best candidate for burning there has been for many years’,

the quantum mechanical approach to paranormal phenomena boasts, among its contributors and supporters, very prominent physicists. Contrary to what Flew² claimed to be the case twenty years ago, there is no question anymore of over-specialised great scientific minds daydreaming about phenomena way outside their specialism, at the same time that ignorant popularisers superficially appropriate – in the manner of the post-structuralist philosophers chastised by Sokal and Bricmont³ – advanced physics way beyond their comprehension. A wider conceptual context for the recent theoretical advances in parapsychology has been provided meanwhile by the emergence of philosophical discourse on such topics as synchronicity, causality, implicate order, and hylic pluralism.⁴

Of these alternatives the line following the original inspiration of the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paradox⁵ certainly seems to be the most promising. Its serious proponents are mainstream theoretical physicists working within state-of-the-art theoretical approaches of their discipline, while Sheldrake’s positioning is deliberately peripheral, and has the confusing observational complexity of the life sciences to rely on, instead of the elegant simplicity of thought experiments, differential equations and excessively controlled experimental set-ups in physics. Perhaps morphogenetic fields, with their supposed ubiquity of information flow, if they are to be retained at all as a theory of reality, may ultimately be subsumed under some future physics of non-locality to emerge in the wake of EPR and similar implications of quantum mechanics.

Over the decades, a few leading ideas have come up in EPR research which may well be translated (with a, perhaps excessive, degree of poetic license) to the situation of an apparently veridical *sangoma* oracle. In the first place there is the condition of *entanglement*: two distinct elements of reality are incapable of working upon each other i.e. exchanging ‘information’ directly, yet what happens to one has exhaustive implications for what happens to the other. For instance, a glass of water finds itself in a black box, outside of which two observers, who cannot possibly communicate with one another directly, drink from the water in the glass through straws protruding from the black box; neither can predict when the glass will be empty, but for each the attainment of that state depends not only on his own drinking

¹ Newth 1981, as quoted anonymously on the blurb of Sheldrake 1981. Clearly, Newth’s expression offers a school example of the violence with which an established paradigm will defend itself against fundamental challenges; cf. Kuhn 1962.

² Flew 1982: 195n.

³ Sokal & Bricmont 1997; see my more extensive remarks on their work in chapter 15.

⁴ Jung 1972; Poortman 1978; Bohm 1980, 1986; Brier 1974; Brier & Schmidt-Raghavan 1982.

⁵ Cf. Einstein *et al.* 1935.

but also on the other's. An implication of quantum mechanics appears to be that such a condition of entanglement is attended by *the tension between unicity and plurality*: now the situation will be marked by the discreteness of the two elements, and ordinary assumptions concerning the macro world will obtain, now the situation will be marked by the merging of the elements, defeating the ordinary assumptions concerning the macro world.¹

Perhaps this is a model for the relation between the diviner and the surrounding world. In everyday life, and during divination sessions when the diviner is fully alert, focused, and verbalising, the condition of plurality (in this case: duality) prevails, the diviner is the knowing subject and what he knows about the outside world is constrained by the fact that he is emphatically dissociating himself, as a distinct element, from the rest of the world. At such moments the Kantian epistemology obtains: the diviner as subject has no *direct* knowledge of the outside object-world, but can only build a mental representation of that world in his own mind, within the limitations of his sensory impressions. Needless to say that it is specifically in the light of the Kantian epistemology that divination, astrology, telepathy, and other forms of extrasensory perception are relegated to the realm of illusion and fraud – for that epistemology assumes that man is forever imprisoned within his impenetrable mind. However, there is another, fundamentally different condition, which obtains when the diviner suspends his subject-object relation with the surrounding world, and instead trades the duality implied in that subject-object relation, for a moment of unicity, in the light of which his mind is not impenetrable but porous, and continuous with the world. Whatever the world contains in the way of traces of information on past and future events, is then in principle available for the diviner's cognition. Whether he can capture some of that information and continue to have a measure of access to it when subsequently (returned to a condition of duality) re-focusing and verbalising, *depends on the existence of a knowledge filter between the states of unicity and plurality*. For most inhabitants of the North Atlantic region this filter would filter out practically 100% of extrasensorily acquired world information in most situations – yet the great majority of people, even in that region, has occasional experiences of veridical telepathy and precognition. However, apparently one can mentally train (e.g. as a *sangoma*) to reduce the filter's effectiveness, and to create situations conducive to relatively low filtering (e.g. dimmed lights, throbbing drums, meaningless patterns as in the gazing at water, oil or coffee dregs, or confrontation with an overflow of contradictory information as in a *sangoma* session or in reading an astrological chart). Also, the knowledge filter appears to be less effective in a cultural environment that does not emphatically subscribe to sensorialist rationality and its Kantian epistemology – such an

¹ Since Einstein *et al.*'s thought experiment was first published, in 1935, it has received ample discussion and experimental confirmation, e.g. Aspect *et al.* 1982; Bell 1964; Bohm & Aharonov 1957; Aerts 1983, 1985, 1999. I am indebted to the theoretical physicist and philosopher Diederick Aerts for discussions on this point, but the responsibility for my, no doubt crippled, formulations on EPR is entirely mine.

environment can be found in many milieus in Africa throughout the twentieth century CE, as well as worldwide among pious Christian and Muslim believers, and among New Age sympathisers. I fear that the above ‘model’ is little more than a crippled metaphor, for the situation of one element of reality contemplating the whole reality outside itself is likely to have very different implications from the situation of two elements of reality being *entangled* within the wider reality surrounding them. One could try to consider the diviner and his client as two observers in an entangled state, but then it remains unclear what specific conditions cause such entanglement so as to single them out from the rest of the world. Anyway, the task of intercultural epistemology is not to solve the riddles of the world, but to call attention to the world-wide diversity of approaches vis-à-vis those riddles, other people’s promising attempts at such resolution, and to help create an intercultural framework within which these can be appreciated.

Meanwhile the oscillating between the unicity and plurality opens up vistas beyond the subject-object distinction within which most of the Western philosophical tradition has entrenched itself for several millennia and especially since Descartes, although from its very beginning Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus (all greatly influenced by much older Egyptian philosophy)¹ have profoundly struggled with the problem of reconciling the one and the many, by defining the conditions under which unicity can be said to govern (in the number mysticism of the *tetraktys*, in the perennial nature of the Ideas, and in the overflowing of the One). There are strong religious associations here. Mysticism, trance and ecstasy are informed by the desire, the technique, or the imperative, to shed plurality and merge into unicity. Durkheim’s theory of religion, referred to repeatedly throughout this book, hinges on two moments of emergence: the emergence of the sacred to which numerous individuals submit by opposition to the profane, and the emergence of the social as the ultimate referent of the sacred object whose sacrality in itself is merely imposed and non-intrinsic. Both movements are a way of negotiating between unicity and plurality. The relation between a symbol and that to which it refers is caught in the same dialectics: from one perspective the symbol only represents the referent and derives all its significance from the latter, but from another perspective the symbol no longer symbolises but takes on an semi-independent life on its own, in a similar tension between sustained reference and broken reference.

Nearly forty years ago, it was my extensive but unpublished, juvenile analysis of Ancient Greek mythological symbolism in the work of the Belgian literary writer Hugo Claus which first drove this insight home to me.² Although convinced that I had discovered something worthwhile, I impatiently moved on, to become a poet and then an Africanist anthropologist, and for the next decades had little use for theories of symbols beyond the ones of Durkheim and Marx. I filed the idea away in my poetry:

¹ Cf. Hornung 1971; Stricker 1963-1989; Wilkinson 1994.

² Van Binsbergen 1966.

‘...when I
discovered the flip-flop nature of the symbol
as alternation between reference and not, so God is thought
that constantly denies itself, or else
would be incapable of thought, isn’t that wonderfall.’¹

Then again, when defending my doctoral thesis in 1979, one of the dozen or so Propositions which (by Dutch custom) accompanied my book-length argument was

‘13. Following in the footsteps of Langer and Cassirer,² many anthropologists emphasise the referential nature of symbols. However, an essential characteristic of symbols is that, under conditions which remain to be specified, they now refer to their referents, now are absolutely autonomous vis-à-vis those referents.’³

It is only in the present context that I can see the wider implications of what already then struck me as an important key to the understanding of social and natural life.

Departing from the main current of Western philosophy and seeking inspiration in negative theology across the centuries, the challenge to think beyond binary opposition and to appreciate the unicity in plurality has been characteristic of Derrida’s work; it is therefore understandable that he sees religion as a negotiation of the bipolar in unicity.⁴ It is no accident that throughout the handful of millennia in which we can clearly discern mankind’s religious expressions, religion appears to have formed the privileged context in which to confront and resolve the tension between *The One and the Many* – the apt title of Erik Hornung’s seminal analysis of the Ancient Egyptian pantheon, but also the title of Diederick Aerts’s exploration of quantum mechanics along EPR lines.⁵ This suggests that divination, trance and shamanism, have been among the most crucial stances of mankind in the formation of a world-picture, and that their progressive elaboration (which I will study in more detail in *The Leopard’s Unchanging Spots*) has been one of the most exciting aspects of the human adventure. We will not be surprised to see the first detectable traces of

¹ Van Binsbergen 1979d. The non-existent last word in the English translation is an attempt to render a pun in the original Dutch:

‘...toen ik
de flipflop eigenschap van het symbool ontdekte
verwijzend en dan steeds weer niet God is het denken
dat steeds zichzelf ontkent en zonder dat
niet denken kan is dat niet wonderbier’.

² Cf. Cassirer 1953-1957 (originally published in German 1923-1929); Langer 1942.

³ Van Binsbergen 1979c:

‘13. In navolging van Langer en Cassirer leggen vele antropologen de nadruk op het verwijzend karakter van symbolen. Een essentiële eigenschap van symbolen is echter dat zij, onder nader te specificeren condities, nu eens verwijzen naar hun referenten, dan weer volstrekt autonoom zijn ten opzichte van die referenten.’

⁴ Derrida 1996; cf. van Binsbergen 2000e.

⁵ Aerts 1981; Hornung 1971.

religion dominated, around the figure of the Great Mother goddess, by the greatest mystery of unicity/plurality as the latter reveal themselves in pregnancy and birth, only much later to be supplanted by male alternatives in which not the flesh but the mind is celebrated. Perhaps the emergence of full shamanism marks this transition.

But whatever the reader's expectations may be, it is outside our present scope to further explore these explanatory advances made by others. They belong to the domains of the philosophy of mind, of epistemology, of the philosophy of nature and of parapsychology, and no longer to that of intercultural philosophy. For the latter domain it is enough to have demonstrated, on empirical grounds that have currency in North Atlantic science and epistemology, the untenability of the hegemonic, subordinating assumptions of a reductionist approach to non-Western systems of belief and ritual practice. My 'becoming a *sangoma*' has been intended as an act of political solidarity and unruptured sociability, perhaps also as an act of performatively inserting myself in an exotic high status, but it has most of all been a road to exploring interculturally knowledge regimes outside North Atlantic science and outside North Atlantic scientific collective representations. In the process I have been made aware of the complexity of the intercultural perspective, and have had to acknowledge that the North Atlantic region does by no means have the monopoly of valid knowledge of the world – and therefore has many important lessons to learn yet, deriving from other regional cultural traditions where other forms of valid knowledge have been attained.¹

7.7. A field of tension: The continuities and contradictions of the intercultural quest for knowledge

In New York, at the turning point of World War II, and realising full well² that its unspeakable disasters had been brought upon humanity by the explosive chemistry *between* rationality and mythical thought, *reacting together and reinforcing each other* (instead of excluding each other) in Germany from the eighteenth century CE onwards, Horkheimer and Adorno published their sobering *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.³ Their long *Exkurs I* is entirely devoted to the development of the Homeric image of Odysseus tied with the ropes of rationality to the mast of his ship, while he and his shipmates are enchanted nearly to the point of self-destruction by the Sirens' song of mythical thought.⁴ Let us proceed carefully here; for the dialectics of rationality also include Auschwitz and Hiroshima, under a diabolical pact with myth to which rationality, of all human achievements and capabilities, lend the terrible

¹ On the desirability, for North Atlantic science, to learn from non-Western knowledge traditions, cf. also Harding 1994, 1997; I have taken up her seminal views in: van Binsbergen 2001c, 2002b, 2002c.

² Adorno 1951.

³ Horkheimer & Adorno 1986.

⁴ Horkheimer & Adorno 1986: 51-87.

means of realisation. Yet the Homeric image helps to bring out what makes my becoming a *sangoma* such an anathema: the suspicion that I have allowed a scientific mind like mine to be captured, to the point of self-destruction, by regressive mythical thought, and that I am using my status as a well-known anthropologist of religion, and a professor, to corrupt other minds to such mythical thought in departure from rationality.

I have shown that such a view of the situation is wrong. If *sangomahood* is demonstrably a venue to valid knowledge which is not available under the dominant North Atlantic sensorialist model, then it is not irrational, but supremely rational, to adopt and advocate *sangomahood*, and to use this African achievement of mental technology as a corrective to the limitations of North Atlantic science, within an encompassing view of valid knowledge that comprises, along with all other valid knowledge produced by humankind wherever and whenever, both *sangoma* science and North Atlantic science. *Sangomas* are Southern Africa's local intellectuals *par excellence*. They know themselves to be specialists in knowledge, meaning and truth. The structure of their world view is rational in the sense that it is articulated in terms of well-formed propositions setting forth cause and effect. The same rationality also informs the questions and answers that, punctuated by throws, make up the *sangoma* divination session. If, at some point in the session, the oracle's answer apparently does not manifestly address the preceding question, the question is repeated; if the answer is ambiguous (as is often the case), the earlier question is narrowed down so as to force a clear outcome. The meanings associated with a particular combination that has come up, reflect rational home truths of the village and the law court. For instance, under the 'object' dimension the combination



, *Zvibili*, 'a pair', has the conventionalised meaning:

'This thing cannot move by itself so someone took it away'

– a rational statement in the best classic tradition. A standard interpretation of



, *Vuba*, 'mixture' is:

'Let us mix our cattle, but each of us must watch his own'

– a sober reminder of both the sociability, yet the distrust, and the production risks which together make up Southern African cattle-keeping society. Many oracular admonitions come in the form of rhetorical questions confronting the client with the logical implications of the state of affairs and of his previous actions. Gluckman's 'reasonable man' (the explicit local model of the rationally acting person which this eminent ethnographer of the Zulu and the Lozi (or Barotse) found to inform the court cases he analysed in Barotseland, western Zambia)¹ would feel very much at home

¹ Gluckman 1967, 1969; Yngvesson 1978; van Binsbergen 1977, 2003a, 2003b.

in a *sangoma* divination session, which as an institutional complex belongs to the same general cultural area anyway.

And if the *sangoma* oracle yields so much knowledge that is empirically verifiable and that turns out to be correct, it is eminently rational to take seriously also those pronouncements of the oracle that are not open to direct empirical verification (the ancestral interpretations and ritual injunctions). It is not irrational to adopt the premise of the intervention of invisible personal agents, such as ancestors, if that premise provides an obvious explanation of phenomena (*in casu* the production of valid empirical knowledge by the *sangoma* oracle), even if such an explanation is admittedly not inescapable (no explanation ever is, as Quine has demonstrated) since the telepathy and the cosmic model offer at least equally attractive explanations.¹ The belief in invisible, eminently powerful agents is not in itself irrational, if articulated rationally; it amounts to a most effective and most economical explanation, even if it might not be the correct explanation. Most of the philosophy of the Western tradition, from classical Antiquity via Late Antiquity (Augustine) to the Middle Ages (Abelard, Aquinas) and right through to Kant was both rational and theistic, that is, cast in terms of the intervention of an invisible, personal, all-powerful being, God. And what is ironic in the present context: cleromantic divination (by the casting of counters such as tablets or dice, as happens in the *sangoma* oracle) was an acknowledged way of ascertaining the will of God or of the gods, not only among many non-Christian peoples,² but also in the biblical tradition and in the works of Augustine.³ Augustine was opposed to astrology,⁴ but the great figures of Medieval Christian philosophy, Albertus and Roger Bacon, and even Aquinas – that cornerstone of rational Christian philosophy along Aristotelian lines – repeatedly spoke out in favour of astrology, and wrote extensively on other methods of divination including cleromancy.⁵ It is particularly to be appreciated that the same Greeks of the classical period that gave us the lasting foundations of the Western tradition in philosophy, for lack of a centralised state (which was only imposed upon the fragmented city states of Ancient Greece by the, peripherally-Greek, Macedonian Alexander the Great) derived such limited political and cultural unity as they had, largely from the functioning of local, regional and supra-regional oracular shrines, of which Delphi and Dodona were only the two best known.⁶ In the

¹ Quine 1953b.

² For a very full, and still valuable, comparative account see the many articles on specific peoples, religions and periods *s.v.* 'divination' in Hastings *et al.* 1908-1921.

³ Van der Meer 1947: 69, referring to Augustine's letter 228, 12, which contains a discussion of Prov. 18: 18.

⁴ Augustine, *De civitate dei*: cc. 1-7; van der Meer 1947: 69; Tester 1989: 109f.

⁵ Tester 1989: 181, cf. Aquinas, *Commentarii in Aristotelem De caelo et mundo et Alios: De generatione et corruptione* (Aquinas 1980a); Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* III.84 (Aquinas 1980c); Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia, q.115 a.4 (Aquinas 1980d); Aquinas, *De Sortibus* (Aquinas 1980b).

⁶ Bouché-Leclercq 1879; de Scheffer 1943; Flacelière 1961; Fontenrose 1978, 1980; Maass 1993; Nilsson 1951; Parke 1967, 1972; Parke & Wormell 1956; Rosenberger 2001; Farnell 1895-1909.

best scientific tradition, modern scholars have attempted to explain away the effectiveness of these oracles' pronouncements by claiming that they were based on extensive intelligence networks, complete with spies and mail pigeons, were delivered under circumstances suggestive of sleight-of-hand not to say fraud, and that they were inherently ambiguous and multi-interpretable. Yet there is a distinct possibility that the society which the North Atlantic region has for centuries credited¹ with a paroxysm of, even a monopoly on, rationality, at the same time thrived on the oracular production and circulation of valid divinatory knowledge acquired, by the oracular priests and priestesses, not just by ordinary communication techniques and impression management, but also through genuine extrasensory means.

Meanwhile it is fair to admit that the combination of rationality and theistic beliefs has certainly not gone without challenges, notably from reflections on the problem of evil, from naturalistic explanations of theistic belief as offered by Marx and Engels, Durkheim, and Freud; and the philosophical assessment of atheism, from Plato – himself very much a theist – onwards.² Throughout my work as an anthropologist of religion, these two authors, Durkheim and Marx have been my theoretical guides. Therefore, while I reject the allegation of being corrupted by mythical thought, I can only acknowledge the tension which exists between my conception of truth as an empirical scientist, and as a *sangoma*.

This tension has informed the long and winding argument throughout Part III. But it is a creative, illuminating and liberating tension, as long as it is not obliterated by shifting all our energy, all our allegiance, to only one of the two poles between which the tension exists. The distinctness of the two poles calls forth the tension, but the tension is also the very condition that links them, and renders them part of the same overarching system. The very fact that the tension exists, demonstrates that the two poles are not really irreconcilable and do not really constitute two different worlds, separated by a boundary that cannot be crossed. This is the kind³ of conceptual material one needs in order to think through both the distinctness, and the interconnectedness, of a plurality of cultural orientations, including, as in the present case, *sangomahood* and North Atlantic sensorialist epistemology. It is the argument I extensively present in chapter 15: 'cultures do not exist' (any more).

¹ Albeit for the wrong, Eurocentric reasons, cf. chapter 15 for the *Black Athena* discussion as initiated by Bernal 1987, 1991. But Bernal did not initiate the debate on Ancient Greek rationality. Already in 1951 Dodds called our attention to what he saw as 'irrational' sides of classical Greek culture.

² Cf. Durkheim 1912; Flew 2000; Freud 1927, 1930; Marx & Engels 1975-1983, 1957; Nielsen 2000; Peterson 2000; Plantinga 1974, 1993; Plantinga & Wolterstorff 1983; Swinburne 1981; Plato, *Leges*, 885A (Plato 1921). Concerning the last reference: godlessness (*asebeia*) was a most serious offence among the Ancient Greeks, a major factor to earn Socrates, for one, a death sentence.

³ But not necessarily expressed by the words I use here. Clearly, Derrida's *différance*, Mall's 'localised placelessness', and Guattari's *deterritorialising strategies*, are similar metaphors speaking to the same tension, with comparable effectiveness; Mall 1995; Guattari 1992; Derrida 1967b.

If the undeniable (and, as we have seen in the present chapter, stimulatingly productive) tension between *sangomahood* and North Atlantic epistemology is allowed to be hardened and reified into an absolute contradiction, if the two are considered to be worlds apart, separated by a non-negotiable boundary, then I would end up in a nightmare. I would have nothing left to say in apology for being both a professor and a *sangoma* – I would succumb, if not to the schizophrenia that would then be the most significant aspect of my personal situation, then at least to the social stigma which the inevitable accusation of schizophrenia would bring upon me.

7.8. Against cultural and epistemological relativism

But let us realise that there is a highly influential school of thought under which this nightmare is already a reality, even a reality taken for granted: cultural relativism. This approach believes in effective boundaries between so-called ‘cultures’. It also believes in the practical autonomy of the process of social life and knowledge construction that take place within these boundaries, in each of the many distinct cultural domains so postulated. Questions such as

‘how can you be a *sangoma* and a university professor at the same time’

imply an absolute contradiction, solid boundaries, separate worlds. While apparently informed by simple common sense, in fact they imply the full package of cultural relativism which, admittedly, has come to be so effectively absorbed into modern North Atlantic common sense as to appear self-evident.¹ In the present chapter (which deals with the intercultural mediation of knowledge and with spiritual technology) autobiography and introspection have played such a prominent role that I could not help raising suspicions of self-indulgence. This self-referential emphasis has perhaps allowed me to illuminate fundamental points of interculturality, but at the expense of making myself far more vulnerable than philosophers normally do in their texts (with notable exceptions such as Marcus Aurelius and Kierkegaard). Let me end this chapter on a note that is systematic and distancing, and that therefore finally may have some recognisable validity for those many readers whose engagement with interculturality has differed from mine, and may well have been more distant and incidental.

If ‘cultures do not exist’ any more, if we reject cultural relativism, then it is neither possible to be wholeheartedly an epistemological relativist claiming – in the tradition set by Protagoras² – that there is a different truth for every time, place, context, and cultural orientation. Just as the problems of intercultural knowledge and understanding are not fundamentally different from the problems of interpersonal knowledge and understanding (because what could have made them different, the

¹ Cf. chapter 15.

² Plato, *Theaetetus* (Plato 1921, vol. VII); for the refreshing argument that relativism implies its own refutation, cf. Siegel 1993. Also cf. Harris 1993.

existence of a distinct plane of humanity at which ‘cultures do exist’, turns out to be a false assumption), so too there is no *fundamental* difference (not ruling out differences of relatively minor importance), between the implications of rival and apparently mutually incompatible knowledge claims within one scientific discipline (or adjacent disciplines), on the one hand, and the implications of rival and apparently mutually incompatible knowledge claims between different cultural orientations such as the North Atlantic region and the historic Southern African region, on the other. In the philosophy of science, Kuhn’s departure (in terms of, almost, a market conjuncture or fashion of successive and equivalent paradigms – largely informed by Kuhn’s version of the history of science) from the Popperian model of the growth of knowledge through methodical falsification at first persuasively appeared, self-fulfillingly, to constitute a revolution in Kuhnian terms.¹ But the new relativism it heralded has now considerably subsided, having produced in the meantime, as a remaining positive effect, a healthily enhanced awareness of the social and political process of scientific knowledge construction.² What has emerged is a general acceptance of the insight, already pioneered by Durkheim and especially by Marx,³ that all knowledge is socially and culturally determined.⁴ My point here is that the field within which such determination takes place is not bounded to constitute a single discipline, a single academic elite, a single language domain, a single culture, a single historical period, but that that field ramifies out so as to encompass, ultimately, the entire history of the whole of humankind. Within that maximally extended field, demarcations of relative sub-domains may be made for convenience’s sake (and let us not forget: for the sake of institutional interest, as vested in university departments, disciplines, professional organisations, etc.). There is no denying that there are enhanced degrees of interaction, mutual intelligibility, accountability and exercise of power within such sub-domains. Yet the demarcations between such sub-domains are porous, ephemeral, arbitrary, situational. Therefore, it is not possible for any producer of systematic, intersubjective knowledge (such as science) to retreat comfortably within a secluded (sub-)domain in the privileged and unchallenged enjoyment of his epistemological security. Ultimately all human knowledge construction takes place within one and the same epistemological space.

¹ Kuhn 1962; Popper 1959; Lakatos & Musgrave 1970; Harding 1994, 1997.

² Harding 1986, 1991, 1993; Knorr-Cetina 1983; Latour & Woolgar 1979; Nencel & Pels 1991; Pickering 1984; Pinch 1986.

³ Durkheim 1912; Marx & Engels 1975-1983, with, on this point, Torrance 1995 as an excellent guide through Marx’s oeuvre.

⁴ Even though the point is of obvious interest for an argument exploring to what extent the shifting back and forth between a North Atlantic and a Southern African context qualifies or disqualifies knowledge claims, I cannot here explore the implications of the so-called ‘strong programme’ in the sociology of knowledge, which holds that this social determination amounts not so much to undesirable and discardable accretions upon a kernel of true knowledge unaffected by such determination, but that true knowledge itself is socially determined. Cf. Barnes 1974, 1982; Bloor 1991; Brown 1984, 1989.

7.9. Towards a unitary epistemological stance: The example of the world history of divination systems as early science

The unitary epistemological space I claim here is reflected in what I see as the unitary history of human science. The process of what finally emerged, in late modern times, as North Atlantic hegemony in the domain of scientific knowledge production, started out, over five thousand years ago and far away from the North Atlantic region, as a conscious endeavour of literate specialists, in Ancient Mesopotamia, to administer and improve the two main procedures for the construction of knowledge held to be vitally important to the king and the state: hepatoscopy and astrology, the two queens¹ of Mesopotamian early science. To the east, the north, and south-east of Mesopotamia there is a continuous pattern of cultural distribution all over Asia, which has allowed the prominent Assyriologist Oppenheim to write:²

‘Divination is applied in Mesopotamia on two distinct levels – the popular or folklore level and that of elaborate scholarly amplification and specialization. Both constitute a trans-Asiatic culture trait. Evidence for this is available from the Mesopotamian region across Asia to China, with Japan in the East and Etruria in the West as outposts. In Egypt, divination remains conspicuously absent up to the last dynasties, when a good deal of “Asianization” took place. There is a wide range in the media and the techniques of divination, conditioned by time and region. These variations only underline the deep-seated and lasting need for this type of

¹ Cf. Gadd 1966: 30:

‘the two queens of Babylonian science, the extispicium and astrology, with oil-divination (in its formal aspect) a sister younger in importance if not in age’.

² Oppenheim 1966: 37. My own comparative historical research into the antecedents of African divination systems since 1990 (van Binsbergen forthcoming (d)), across at least three continents and five millennia, clearly has been in part fulfilment of the collective task outlined by Oppenheim. In my impression the evidence for divination in Egypt in the second and third millennium BCE is rather somewhat more positive than Oppenheim claims; but he is certainly representing a view commonly held among Egyptologists. By the same token, Oppenheim’s contention that extispicy – a divinatory art raised to great perfection in Ancient Mesopotamia – must originate in Central Asia may be too sweeping. Considering the ethnographic record, it might as well originate in Africa where it has also been attested (cf. Rose 1911: 779 for the Nandi and the Masai in East Africa; Abbink 1993 for Ethiopia; van Binsbergen 1984b, 1988b, and the present book, chapter 13.1, on the West African Manjak). Or it may have such great antiquity (Upper Palaeolithic) that it can be subsumed under a general Old-World cultural substrate encompassing both continents, as well as Europe. In addition to fragmented archaeological and anthropological evidence, the plausibility of such a substrate – however contentious an idea – can be argued on extensive linguistic and genetic grounds (notably current work on the wide extent of the Nostratic and even more so the Dene-Sino-Caucasian linguistic macrofamilies, and on the linguistic and cultural historical implications of population genetics as conducted in the past decades by Cavalli-Sforza and his school (for a first introduction, cf. Shevoroshkin 1991; Dolgopolsky 1998; Bomhard & Kerns 1994; Cavalli-Sforza 1997; Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994). The assumption of such a substrate would enable us to explain what otherwise remains an inexplicable coincidence of cultural history: the fact that the four-tablet oracle of Southern Africa has close parallels (in shape, decoration, and use) in the form of likewise fourfold sets of gaming pieces among the native population of North America, where the tablets are also used for divination (Culin 1975; van Binsbergen, forthcoming (d).) However, given the controversial nature of the idea of such a substrate a full discussion would be needed both of the evidence and of the underlying theoretical and methodological foundations. That discussion would take us too far away from the central project of the present book, intercultural philosophy. I have covered this ground: van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

communion with the supernatural, whatever specific methods of observation and interpretation are applied. (...) Wherever in Asia either the observations or the predictions related to divination have been preserved in writing, or where – this optimum happened only in Mesopotamia – both aspects of this science are available to us, we are given the opportunity to look deep into such a civilization. From the oracle bones of Anyang in northern China and the earliest liver models found in Mari to the elaborate horoscope of yesterday's India, we have an overwhelming abundance of information well able to take us on a grand tour through space and time, exploring much of the intellectual history of Asia. Like currents which move across the entire immense continent, central Asiatic divination practices reach the Euphrates (extispicy) and become there the object of scholarly endeavors from the early second millennium B.C. onward, and Mesopotamian astrology and other divination methods penetrate eastward through India, Tibet, and into China during the first half of the first millennium A.D. To trace these lines of contact will be the task of several generations of scholars from many disciplines.⁷

Pan-Babylonianism reigned and died a century ago,¹ and we no longer believe that, since it is in Mesopotamia² that we have first documentary attestations for a particular widely distributed trait, Mesopotamia must be the place where the trait originated. Rather we should view the history of science in the Old World as a complex evolving system of interaction, in which an Upper Palaeolithic cultural substrate, with widespread distribution across the Old World and possibly part of the New World, perhaps in combination with a Neolithic substrate of less extended distribution, came to be locally formalised with the emergence of literacy, of specialist intellectual production, of organised religion, and of the state, in Mesopotamia and (in an initially linked but rapidly divergent way) in Egypt. Subsequently the local literate variant (of that cultural system whose illiterate variants have displayed a very much wider distribution than these two regions alone) acquired such incomparably greater capability of transmission and boundary crossing, that it spread over much of the original, large non-literate distribution area, and imposed its own literate form (soon in subsequently no-longer-literate derivatives, as localising transformations); after which the whole process repeated itself elsewhere within, at the fringes of, and eventually even beyond the original distribution area of the substrate.³

Of this global process, North Atlantic science is certainly not the only offshoot to survive into the twentieth century CE. And when, in the late first millennium and the first half of the second millennium CE, this process spread to western Europe through monks and clerics guarding and rediscovering the heritage of Graeco-Roman Antiquity, to which crusaders and, particularly, Jewish, Arab and Byzantine translators and mediators added what the Near East had retained, developed and received from the rest of Asia (often via the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean trade) and from Africa (through the Indian Ocean trade and the trans-Saharan trade)⁴ – then

¹ Winckler 1903, 1907; Schmidt 1908. Already L.W. King (1915) put paid to this movement.

² Or in Ancient Egypt, for that matter.

³ Van Binsbergen 1996c, 1996e, forthcoming (a), (d), (e).

⁴ Needham *c.s.* 1961 (Silk Road); Neville *et al.* 1975; Davidson 1959; Duyvendak 1949; Toussaint 1966; Schoff 1912; Tibbets 1971; Sauvaget 1948 (Indian Ocean).

this scholarly science (of which magic and the occult have constituted an amazingly large part throughout the millennia, only to decline in the West in the last few centuries),¹ was implanted upon a substratum of much older local knowledge. The latter constituted, in many respects, the western fringe of the Old World substratum that had, four millennia earlier, informed the emergence of science in Mesopotamia in the first place – note the similarities, even continuities, in language, world view, myths, socio-political organisation, religion, ritual, and divinatory practices between the ancient world of north-western Europe, the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean, and the Ancient Near East. It is their basis in literacy that has helped forms of specialist knowledge to retain something of their original outlines, and to remain detectable for our scholarship even after processes of secondary diffusion and transformative localisation had been going on for centuries.

What is the evidence for such a claim of continuity? Since the discovery of the Indo-European language family, the continuities in *language* need no further adstruction, even though the neat Romantic idea of a branching tree may now supplanted, among certain linguists, by that of complex fields of spatial interaction within syntactic and phonological constraints. However, the most advanced work in the field of long-range linguistic continuities is that in terms of macrofamilies (Nostratic, Eurasiatic, Dene-Sino-Caucasian) and the attempted reconstruction of mankind's original Mother Tongue, and that is largely still in terms of the genetic tree model.² The continuities in *world view* are demonstrated most cogently in works like Stricker's *The Birth of Horus*.³ His point of departure is an obscure Ancient Egyptian textual and iconographic composition on human conception and birth. He demonstrates that the insights to read such a document may be confidently gleaned from Ancient Greek, Roman, Hebrew, Persian, Teutonic and Vedic literatures that happen to converge amazingly on these points. Next, continuities in the field of *myths* can be adequately demonstrated from any major comparative survey, of which there is a great number.⁴ On continuities in *socio-political and religious organisation*, especially the work of and around Dumézil deserves to be mentioned here.⁵ Continuities in *divination* throughout the Old World are unmistakable (above we have seen a long quotation from Oppenheim on this point) and have been noted early on.⁶

¹ Thorndike 1923-58; Thomas 1978; Bergier 1988; Levack 1992.

² Cf. Dolgopolsky 1998; Bomhard & Kerns 1994; Shevoroshkin 1991; Ruhlen 1994; Greenberg 1987.

³ Stricker 1963-1989.

⁴ Conveniently listed in Long 1993. Fontenrose (1980) is a particularly convincing example of such mythological studies. In recent years, the comparative study of myth has asserted itself as an independent path towards the reconstruction of mankind's earliest history, in addition to archaeology, linguistics, genetics, and the study of contemporary distribution patterns of anthropological traits; cf. Witzel 2001.

⁵ Dumézil 1939, 1958, 1959, 1969, 1970, 1986.

⁶ Cf. Gaskell 1911, against the background of the extensive material on divination in Hastings 1908-1921.

Given the rediffusion of sacred kingship from pharaonic Egypt over Africa (as one example of the feedback process hinted at above),¹ and the diffusion of Islam and Christianity over the African continent (a process that also may have had some elements of the same feedback process, given the probability that these world religions count African elements among their antecedents), second millennium CE African knowledge systems may also be seen as distant offshoots, however isolated and disguised, of the same worldwide history of systematic specialist knowledge that produced modern science in the North Atlantic region.

The latter point has an excellent illustration in the history of astrology, which can be traced over five millennia and ramifies over the entire Old World.² But the same point may also be made by reference to the, considerably less studied, divination systems of the African continent,³ which both in West Africa (where they occur under the names of Ifa and ‘Sixteen Cowries’) and in Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean region, are unmistakable transformations of the Arabian divinatory magic called *‘ilm al-raml* (‘sand science’) or *khatt al-raml* (‘sand writing’)⁴ emerging around 1000 CE in ‘Abāssid Iraq under the combined influence of Islamic (*Ikhwan al-Safa’*a), Chinese (*I Ching*), Hellenistic (astrological), Ancient Egyptian, and Saharan divinatory procedures. The esoterists’ recurrent dream⁵ of all of the Old World’s occult sciences being shoots of the same tree and being supported by a loose international network of itinerant sages sharing a convergent knowledge and recognising each other by secret signs, may not be totally devoid of historical reality.

Meanwhile my argument in the present chapter suggests that, to the attestable mechanisms of transregional transfer of knowledge under pre-modern technologies of communication (such as itinerant trade, the active spread of world religions, the activities of itinerant healers and entertainers), an entire new dimension might be added: transregional and transtemporal transfer of specialist knowledge by extrasensory means. I shall not push this point. Dreaming of rewriting the history of science along such lines could only produce nightmares, but the idea offers an

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (a).

² Pingree 1978; the commentary in this book amounts to an excellent comprehensive overview of Hellenic, Hellenistic, Arabian, Persian, and Indian astrology, and cites the important literature in these fields. European astrology since Renaissance times is mainly Ptolemaic (Hellenistic/Late Antiquity) but has absorbed a selection of the oriental traditions. For Ancient Egyptian astrology (according to most authorities a late development under Persian influence), cf. Cumont 1937; Gundel 1936a, 1936b; Kroll 1894a, 1894b; Neugebauer 1943; Parker 1978.

³ Bascom 1969, 1980; Bewaji 1992; Hébert 1961; Kassibo 1992; Maupoil 1943a, 1943b; Traoré 1979; Trautmann 1939-1940; van Binsbergen 1996c.

⁴ al-Zanati 1908-09; Carra de Vaux 1920; Jaulin 1991; Savage-Smith & Smith 1980; Skinner 1980; van Binsbergen 1996e.

⁵ For the esoterist claims, cf. Blavatsky 1950; Shah 1971. The same theme of interregional networks of knowledge from a mainstream scholarly perspective in: Burkert 1983; Needham *c.s.* 1961. The esoterist variant of this theme was first brought to my attention in May 1991 by my friend and colleague Louis Brenner, specialist in African Islamic occult sciences of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, when asking my advice on the perplexing Bowen n.d.

interesting explanation (remarkably economical in terms of Occam's razor) for the many cases where inventions and ideas, cryptically said to be 'in the air', suddenly materialised simultaneously at different places; or for the wide and comparatively untransformed spread of systems of knowledge whose detailed complexity would seem to be incompatible with such spread, such as in the case of alphabetic writing, astrology, lunar mansions, and geomancy. Sheldrake's theory of morphogenetic fields suggests that ideas which are massively popular in one part of the world would, *ipse facto*, find morphogenetic support in parts of the world where they have not yet been materially introduced. Along similar lines, but in time not space, the transtemporal transfer of extrasensory specialist knowledge is already pioneered, inevitably under scorching and not altogether unjustified sarcasm from the Sceptics' side, by the psychometric reading of archaeological exhibits.¹ In psychometry, a material object (for example artefact, letter, photograph, etc.) is 'read' so as to produce, by extrasensory means, knowledge about past circumstances associated with that object. Tenhaeff² relates a psychometric reading of an artefact belonging to a South African Iron Age site; involving stray Persians in that part of the world, the reading was at first rejected as utterly fantastic, but its plausibility (no more, of course – but that is typical of archaeology) was later independently corroborated by the South African archaeologist Van Riet Howe: the appearance of Persians in the Southern African context is a recurrent theme of history and ethnography, and considering the prominence of Persian (Shirazi) settlements on the East African coast must be considered probability rather than fantasy.³ That the Dutch paragnost in question was most probably unaware of the Persian theme in African history gives further food for thought.

The chain of communication linking both sub-Saharan Africa and Europe with a common inspiration in the Middle East has long been broken, or has been very indirect at best for many centuries. Localising transformation has produced very distinct specialist knowledge systems in contemporary North Atlantic science and in Southern African *sangomahood*. Yet the two do not exist in completely different worlds. In fact they have shared most of their five millennia of traceable history – to the extent that *geomancy*, the West European derivative of *ʿilm al-raml*, was⁴ the subject of innumerable early translations and treatises in Jewish and Christian literature of the first centuries of second millennium CE Europe, was moreover a standard form of magic at Renaissance courts,⁵ as well as the standard form of peasant self-help divination in Germany in the nineteenth century,⁶ while nowadays

¹ Emerson 1979; Goodman 1977; Jones 1979; Ossowiecki 1933; Wolkowski 1977.

² Tenhaeff n.d.

³ Neville *et al.* 1975; van Warmelo 1966; von Sicard 1952, 1962.

⁴ Carmody 1956; d'Alverney 1982; Steinschneider 1904, 1905.

⁵ Agrippa 1967; Anonymous 1704; de Cattani 1608; Piobb 1947; Turner *c.s.* 1989: 103f.

⁶ Anonymous 1920; Anonymous n.d.; Bolte 1925; Helm 1983: 72-78; Hofmann 1919; Storm 1981.

it is again a thriving divinatory industry in the New Age context,¹ although far surpassed in popularity by astrology.²

If thus the history of magic-into-science encompasses both North Atlantic science and the Southern African *sangoma* oracle, and if I can effectively insert myself at various points into the attending spatial distribution and toggle between these historically determined positions, this is because the boundaries that make these positions appear as fundamentally different and irreconcilable, are merely accidental: the product of epistemological and geopolitical strategies and historical events (especially the emergence of North Atlantic military, political and economic global hegemony) of the last few centuries. If we allow ourselves to think these boundaries otherwise, notably as the indications of gradients of difference within an extended and shared field, the initially irresolvable and brutal contradiction dissolves into an illuminating and productive tension.

For such an extended, internally tensioned field of knowledge production encompassing, in principle, the whole of humanity and the entire human history, not a plurality of different epistemologies is called for, but a single one, provided it is interculturally sensitive.

Although anti-relativism as an *epistemological* position (mainly directed against Kuhn and his aftermath) is fairly well articulated in the literature, anti-relativism *in the field of cultural and intercultural studies* has become a rather unpopular option, the most vocal exponents being Gellner's school.³ This unpopularity is easy to understand. The anti-relativist proclaims to measure all cultural orientations, even the weakest in terms of power and numbers, even the one whose bearers have undergone the greatest historical wrongs, by a common standard that – unless we are extremely careful and self-critical – may well risk to be inherently hegemonic and

¹ Hamaker-Zondag 1981; Pennick 1979, 1992; Schwei & Pestka 1990; and many Internet sites to be identified s.v. 'geomancy, geomantic' by any of the common search machines.

² I note that the model for cultural continuity underlying my discussion in this section is largely that of *cultural diffusion*, which, ever since the 19th century CE, has been anthropologists' main stock-in-trade to account for long-range cultural parallels. Meanwhile, however, the impressive (though controversial) work of geneticists like Cavalli-Sforza (1997; Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994) and his school, also extended to quantitative analyses of *linguistic and cultural* processes, has led to the rise, in the course of the 1990s, of the model of *demic diffusion* as a powerful alternative to cultural diffusion. Under demic diffusion it is not cultural traits that are geographically transmitted from one population to another while those populations remain in principle geographically stationary, but it is populations on the move, who in the process carry their culture to a different location, and may thus (if the moves were sufficiently extensive, and sufficiently long ago) create a detectable, fairly permanent and widespread, cultural and linguistic substrate. Underlying the model of demic diffusion is the very notion which in the present book is highly criticised: that of the bounded, integrated, unified culture which forms a total package, within which a human individual can lead her entire life, and that by consequence can be spread geographically as a package. Extensive study of recent advances in genetics and macrofamily comparative linguistics made me appreciate the continuing explanatory power of such a model of culture for prehistory and protohistory. Perhaps my adage 'cultures do not exist' must be revised into 'cultures do not exist *any more*' – for, of course, my argument in this book is largely set against the background of today's globalisation and the multicultural society. I cannot here thresh out the implications of the demic diffusion model; cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (d) and (e).

³ Gellner 1990; Hall & Jarvie 1996.

subjugating, and may certainly be accused of being just that. By contrast, the relativist position ('let a thousand flowers bloom') appears as the champion of equity, justice, understanding and respect, the true exponent of the contemporary multi-cultural global society under the politics of recognition. The snag is that the relativist position can only realise its lofty goal at the expense of literally, deliberately and with the best of intentions, excluding all other cultural orientations from the principles that apply to the one cultural orientation of its exponents – it is a form of conceptual and epistemological apartheid. It sends non-European knowledge traditions back to the ghetto, instead of fondly welcoming them, and allowing ourselves to be welcomed by them, as long lost distant relatives who carry their own inalienable and original credentials as to being members of our global family of knowledge producers. It is the political pathos that makes the debate on relativism and anti-relativism so vicious.¹

This is not to deny the existence of numerous attempts, in the field of intercultural philosophy and the philosophy of religion, particularly with regard to apparently (from the North Atlantic perspective) irrational belief systems that seek to solve the contradiction on which the present chapter hinges, in terms of a careful relativism.² Although I do not endorse these attempts for the reasons indicated, I certainly do not wish to cast doubt on their authors' intellectual and political integrity. My own appeal to a unitary concept of truth that, while in creative tension with local specificities, yet pervades both time and space, is admittedly problematic, especially in the face of the philosophy of difference with its rejection of any claim of a timeless, placeless truth, of a privileged position.

7.10. Situating *sangomahood* in the field of tension between universalist and particularist conceptions of truth

Here it becomes gradually manifest that the contradiction between relativism and anti-relativism also adheres to my own evolving attitude towards *sangomahood*. Not wanting to dissociate myself from *sangoma* beliefs simply because that would constitute a breach in the networks of sociability which I previously entertained as an anthropological fieldworker and as a budding *sangoma*, tends towards the position of relativism; as if I were saying:

¹ Geertz 1984 and 1994; Gellner 1994. Between my distinguished predecessor Heinz Kimmerle, and myself, the same bone of contention can be occasionally detected.

² For examples, and their criticism, cf. Horton 1993; Sogolo 1998; Winch 1964; Sperber 1982 (a most exciting and recommended analysis which convincingly succeeds in finding rationality in such apparently absurd statements like 'this morning I encountered a dragon'). Above, I suggested that, where the assessment of a belief's irrationality is concerned, I prefer to put myself in an *emic* position (see the discussion of this term in chapter 15 and elsewhere in the present book). The only irrational belief I acknowledge as such is one that emphatically proclaims at the same time two premises that are manifestly and blatantly contradictory. Given religions' expertise at covering up contradictions, examples of such irrational beliefs may not be so easy to find as the frequency of appeals to their occurrence in philosophical literature would suggest.

Sangoma divination: translatable to a global format, source of valid knowledge

‘regardless of whether this is true for me (I think it is not), I acknowledge the fact that it is true for you, and if I affirm you in your truth that means that I wish to acknowledge your dignity and do not grudge you your own rightful niche within the ecosystem (the jungle, no doubt) of relativism.’

By contrast however, affirming *sangoma* ideas and continuing to practice *sangoma* activities on the grounds that they constitute valid knowledge and that they do work, tends not towards relativism but towards universalism. For now I am saying:

‘this does work, it is valid, it is true, not only in Southern Africa in some remote village or poor suburb where I may hide from my colleagues and blood relatives, but also in the North Atlantic region, and globally, on the Internet, where I am prepared to articulate it publicly.’

And:

‘It is not possible that this can only work, be valid, be true, in Southern Africa, because there is no real boundary between here and there; because “cultures do not exist”’.

The universalist side sounds much more attractive and politically correct, but once again we must be careful not to destroy the creative tension between these two positions, by siding exclusively with one of the poles of the opposition. For only if this tension is kept up can I stress the validity of one, unitary, all-pervading concept of truth (by virtue of which the *sangoma* oracle produces valid knowledge), while at the same time serving two different masters who fight over my time and my allegiance – *sangomahood* and North Atlantic science.

What I deliberately do in my practice as a *sangoma*, in interaction with my clients, is to mediate, not a universal truth (*not* universal science as some sort of general, liberating heritage of humanity as a whole?), but a very local and essentially non-verifiable truth, cast in terms of ancestors, witchcraft, sacrifices and shrines. At the same time I lend authority to that local truth by producing, in the same session as that in which that truth is expounded, verifiable truths from the client’s life-truths that are open to verification under practically any epistemological regime.

It now begins to transpire that *sangomahood* is not exclusively, not even in the first place, about the mediation of a particular cultural system originating in Southern Africa. *It is about the hope of escape from the overdeterminacy implied in sensorialist rationality, from the ‘cold equations’,¹ from the disenchanted robotic world without spirituality, without miracles, and especially without a deep sense of freedom and therefore of self-chosen engagement – the faith (not necessarily in God or in the ancestors) that can and does remove mountains.² Believe in miracles, and you get them; believe not in them, and they will pass you by. Or as I expressed it in a different context,*

‘the *sangoma* oracle is a way of speaking about the modern world by ignoring it.’³

¹ Cf. Godwin 1971.

² Matt. 17: 20, 21: 21; Mark 11: 23; I Cor. 13: 2.

³ Van Binsbergen 1999c.

For many of my divinatory clients, whether residents of the North Atlantic region or of Southern Africa, the ancestral idiom constitutes a *new* point of view; even African clients often need to be re-converted to it – they tend to be so globalised¹ that the concept of ancestors usually merely stirs vague anxieties and guilt feelings in them, instead of a happy recognition of a lost cultural home once again coming within reach. I expose my clients to intercultural information that makes them begin to consider the ancestors as a possible, thinkable truth in their life, so that they finally find a lever to bring their life back onto its proper track. I thus articulate, unblushingly (although European-born, White, and a university professor specialised in the deconstruction of African religion), a Southern African tradition, while underpinning that tradition, almost deceptively, with universal knowledge procedures about empirical reality.

7.11. Situating sensorialist rationality and defining its boundary conditions

In conclusion we must consider once more, if only briefly, the place of sensorialist rationality in the world-picture that is (albeit fragmentarily) emerging from this chapter. The contradictions are obvious. Trying to both have his cake and eat it, a writer (me) obviously proud of his accomplishments and skills as an empirical scientist lends the methods and the discourse of empirical science, further enhanced by the rational tradition of Western philosophical reflection on knowledge and truth, in order to state the case for his oracle producing valid knowledge through extrasensory means, be they telepathic or otherwise. In other words, an appeal to sensorialist rationality is used to think beyond the limitations of sensorialist rationality. Partly the contradictions are inspired by the choice of audience: since this book is written for philosophers and social scientists, its argument will be best understood and appreciated by them if more or less successfully emulating a discourse they are familiar with. I could have said the same thing while remaining entirely within the established *sangoma* idiom, but that would have been pointless – for the point is mediating that idiom to a new context, where it can articulate new insights, and cast new light on old insights. My position aspires to being more than performative and persuasive – it struggles to bring out a truth even if that truth's essence, by virtue of its interculturality, is that it can hardly be articulated let alone substantiated within any one cultural orientation, including that of philosophy in the Western tradition.

I find it illuminating to view the matter as one of a restricted domain, defined by certain boundary conditions, but enclosed by a much wider domain where those specific limiting boundary conditions do not apply.

¹ For the effect of globalisation on ancestral beliefs in Southern Africa, see chapter 14.

An obvious and often used example is Euclidean planimetry,¹ which has as its boundary conditions two-dimensionality ($z \leq 2$), where the sum of the angles of a triangle is 180° . This restricted domain is enclosed by a wider but still Euclidean domain, where $z \leq 3$, so that in spherical triangles the sum of the angles exceeds 180° . Even this wider domain is merely a restricted domain, enclosed by a wider domain opened up by modern mathematics, where z may approach infinity, need not be an integer, may be negative, etc.

Another obvious example is Newtonian physics viewed as a restricted domain demarcated by specific boundary conditions (including three-dimensional Euclidean space, and the choice of a meso level order of magnitude commensurate with the human body and its capabilities of perception: the range between 10^{-4} and 10^{+4} metres) as merely a small section of the much larger domain opened up by Einstein's theory of relativity.

The point is that formally irreproachable arguments within such a restricted domain lead to results which are at the same time true, and yet not exhaustive. In the same way, the world-picture produced along the lines of sensorialist rationality should be considered a restricted domain. Its arguments are both true and non-exhaustive. Sensorialist rationality is tailored to the measure of the Newtonian world with its specific boundary conditions, and therefore has constituted, ever since the remotest Lower Palaeolithic, man's most powerful, and increasingly sharpened, tool for confronting and mastering the Newtonian world.

Sensorialist rationality is understandably privileged, not only for historical reasons but also for another reason. Implied in sensorialist rationality (and greatly aided by its main tools: writing and graphic representation in images) is the subject-object distinction that has given rise to the emergence of scientific thought in the Ancient Near East, to philosophy, to the modern world, North Atlantic science and technology, and North Atlantic hegemony. Formidable achievements, no doubt, but we must make two qualifications.

In the first place let us acknowledge that this line in the history of human knowledge production has implied an obsession with external control over nature, with violence, therefore; and we have seen, ever since the inception of the Bronze Age, and *a fortiori* since the inception of the Iron Age, and especially in the course of the twentieth century CE, how Lower Palaeolithic survival strategies, but with modern conventional and nuclear weaponry at their disposal instead of the crudest stone tools, lead to explosive violence² and ultimately very near to the destruction of both humanity and the earth as a whole.

Paradoxically, one can learn (for example as a *sangoma*) to participate more fully in the wider domain of the world's potential beyond the limitations of rational sensorialism, and thus have a larger share of extrasensory perception, psychokinesis, etc., than most people in most situations enjoy, but one cannot exercise *deliberate*

¹ Cf. Balazs 1961.

² Cf. Gimbutas 1982, 1991.

control in this wider domain. All one can do is open windows, make oneself available, and wait. If one expertly performs one hundred *sangoma* divination sessions, and each session has thirty throws on the average, then one may expect hundreds of items of extrasensorily acquired knowledge to seep through in that body of material, but one can never pinpoint in advance precisely where this will be the case, let alone that one can *will* a particular throw to yield extrasensory knowledge. The will is the typical faculty of rational sensorialism, given the latter's obsession with control over nature, but it is pointless in the wider domain of which rational sensorialism opens up only a small segment.

In the second place the tradition of thought and research engendered by rationalist sensorialism led us to become aware of the limitations of that philosophical position, and made us wonder as to the boundary conditions which, if chosen differently, would allow us entry into the wider domain of which sensorialist rationality is most probably only a very minor option. The questions may have come from inside the Western tradition, but such answers as we are beginning to formulate come from outside that tradition. Intercultural and comparative philosophy, as well as cultural anthropology and the various linguistic and cultural regional fields of studies (African studies, Asian studies, etc.), provide windows on traditions of thought that, even if they may originally have shared the same Ancient Near Eastern impulse, or may have picked up remote echoes of it in later centuries, still have not been dominated by sensorialist rationality to the same extent as the West has been. Here not only models of thought, but also bodies of articulated experience, may be encountered that remind us of alternatives to sensorialist rationality. *Sangomahood* is certainly such a body, and there is no doubt that the traditions of Africa, Asia, the Americas, Oceania, and Ancient Europe contain many such bodies. They do not only present alternative models about the non-human world, but also about the way in which the human condition is situated within the wider world: models of thought that contain alternatives for the subject–object distinction, and especially procedures of action by which the human being situates herself in the world – in order to sustain a livelihood, but also to contemplate, to admire, to know, to love. To the extent to which these procedures have to be successful for materially productive tasks in the Newtonian world, they spring from the same Palaeolithic survival strategies as have inspired North Atlantic sensorialist rationality. But when it comes to procedures of contemplation, admiration, knowing, to which Newtonian materiality is less central, we can expect these worldwide traditions to contain modes of managing the self that are so fundamentally different from the North Atlantic subject–object construction, that the boundary conditions imprisoning us into the restrictive option of rationalist sensorialism may be effectively circumvented.

Seen in this light, it is not exoticism and escapism that brings us to the study of the paranormal, but a desire to know the full range of reality, so that we may overcome the terrible and violent shortcomings of the main strategy (rationalist sensorialism) with which we as inhabitants of the North Atlantic region have so far

approached the world and ourselves. If the study and practice of *sangomahood* can contribute to that goal, it is time well spent.

Thus my struggle to ‘become a *sangoma*’ (chapter 5), to articulate subsequently that identity by means of a therapeutic practice situated – both spatially and conceptually – within the North Atlantic region (chapter 6), and to translate the Southern African *sangoma* complex to a globalised format in the process while affirming it as a source of valid knowledge in its own right under a worldwide non-relativist epistemology (chapter 7), contains, in a nutshell, many of the major dilemmas of intercultural philosophy, and of the human condition in the present age.

The high priest's two riddles

Intimations of *sangomahood* as a translocal idiom

8.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I have considered *sangomahood* as a context for knowledge production, which, on the one hand, is continuous with (although somewhat peripheral to) the Old World history of science – but which, on the other hand, by acknowledging sources of knowledge not recognised in the dominant Western tradition of rationalist sensorialism, enables us to tap these sources and to find that the knowledge they yield is often valid. In the course of that argument we touched on historical continuities which link *sangomahood* to a widely ramified and perhaps ultimately unitary, esoteric specialist tradition. In the present chapter I conclude my discussion of *sangomahood* in this book by exploring two instances that stress the extent to which this Southern African cult represents, in fact, a translocal idiom. By doing so I hope to make further atonement for my initial, dazed reluctance (as expressed in chapter 5) at approaching *sangomahood* from an analytical perspective. However, for reasons explained in the Introductory chapter my discussion in the following pages will be kept very short – what was meant to be another chapter in this book has now grown into a book in its own right, *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots*.

In this chapter I will be guided by two perplexing pronouncements which the Nata high priest of the Mwali cult, Mr R. Sinombe, made when, during my second visit to his shrine (1991), I received my final confirmation as a *sangoma*.

He then revealed himself to belong to the Ila people of Zambia, the immediate eastern neighbours of the Nkoya people, among whom I have spent a considerable part of my adult life. Nkoya chiefs have lived in Ilaland, I have repeatedly visited them and written on them, and an Ila prophet from the early twentieth century CE, Mupumani (who in a short-lived but massive cult drew followers from within a radius of hundreds of kilometres), played a significant role in my earlier research.¹

¹ Van Binsbergen 1981a.

An important landmark in Sinombe's life's history is a Zimbabwean minor seminary for the Roman Catholic priesthood, where allegedly his great gift for herbalism was discovered and declared compatible with Catholicism. Specialising in the alleviation of great physical pain (for the treatment of which he sells to his professional clients, at an enormous price, a hollow black plastic rod tipped with two short copper sheaths and containing some wiring inside), patients would come to him from all over Southern Africa, including Whites. His main activity, however, was that of a traditional herbalist wholesaler, catering for the specialist pharmacological needs of other traditional healers.

He claimed great antiquity for the healing and oracular tradition which he represents. He volunteered that this tradition goes right back to Ancient Egypt, out of which, in a different direction, also the religion of Israel sprang, in his opinion. At that time I was ignorant of recent scholarship stressing similar links between Egypt and Ancient Israel,¹ had not yet discovered the writings of Martin Bernal, was still completely ignorant of Afrocentrism, and considered all varieties of Egyptocentrism, and of diffusionism in general, antiquated nonsense; as late as 1998 I drafted a book, *Global bee flight*, whose initial purpose was to disprove Egyptocentrism as an aspect of Afrocentrism, and only the specific research in preparation for that book taught me otherwise. Therefore I do not think that Sinombe's claims on this point were fed by something I contributed to the conversation, or by something he could have read from my conscious mind. However, already by that time, under the influence of Cheikh Anta Diop² and his Black American predecessors,³ Afrocentrist and Egyptocentrist ideas were beginning to percolate among African intellectuals and religious leaders, and therefore Sinombe's statements could very well have a contemporary twentieth-century source, rather than constituting millennia-old wisdom handed down through the Mwali cult and similar earlier cults. However, such antiquity is a distinct possibility where Sinombe's views are concerned; it will be further highlighted below, although in connection with South Asia rather than North-eastern Africa.

The high priest certainly gave an original and unexpected account of cult revenue. These moneys, Sinombe said, were going not so much to the central shrines of the Mwali cult but to China, where under modern conditions (i.e. Maoist Communism and its aftermath, but I do not recall Sinombe using those exact terms) elderly people are subject to such neglect and contempt that they need this financial assistance from Africa.⁴ But much of the paper money (of which the cult only

¹ Cf. Görg 1997; Redford 1992. For a dismissal of Ancient Egyptian influence on Judaism, and references to older literature that affirm such influence, cf. van Wijngaarden 1929.

² Diop 1955, 1959, 1960, 1962, 1974, 1977, 1981, 1987, 1993.

³ As extensively discussed in Fauvelle 1996; Howe 1999; Berlinerblau 1999.

⁴ This claim has an interesting counterpart. When I interviewed a Taoist priest (name and address in my possession) at the headquarters of the Taoist Association of China, the White Cloud temple in Beijing, in October 2002, the priest *volunteered* the information that Southern African traditional doctors are essentially

accepts the largest denominations) is left simply to be eaten by termites, which according to Sinombe is a very meaningful use of the donations, considering that insects too are creatures that need and deserve food. A Zen Buddhist master could hardly have come up with a more original approach.

The juggling of vast correspondences in space and time, the suggestion of an intercontinental community of the wise – specialists in magic and religious wisdom – crossing all national and linguistic boundaries and persisting since time immemorial (a cherished idea – I touched on it in the previous chapter – of Sufism, of the Western esoteric tradition, and even¹ of science fiction), the resonances from several of the world’s greatest spiritual traditions, acquaintance with which might derive from Christian missionary education early in life but which just might also be taken to suggest ancient currents of continuity and exchange all over the Old World, and the apparently absurdist attitude to cult revenue and intercontinental solidarity – all this made Sinombe appear to me as a highly enigmatic yet highly impressive figure. Even so I could feel the edge of the late colonial inferiority complex with which he had been brought up: insisting, as a seventy-year-old, on the recognition – more than half a century earlier – of his herbalist knowledge by what effectively can only have been the lowest, local hierarchy of a globally distributed world religion (Roman Catholicism), and on the fact that in more recent days affluent Whites came all the way from South Africa to consult him.

8.2. The high priest’s first riddle: The Saviour

Asked what or who he was, Sinombe (in a manner not without parallels with other prophets and major religious leaders in twentieth-century Southern Africa, and with resonances of the biblical passage where Jesus was thus interrogated)² made no secret of the truly exalted parameters of his self-definition:

‘I am not God; I am not Jesus; I am Mbedzi, “the Saviour”.’

The implication appears to be that of a divine or near-divine being, a demiurge, situated not too far from the Christian tradition, and (like Jesus according to that tradition, or the *bodhisatva* in the religious tradition of South and East Asia) lingers on in a material, earthly existence for the benefit of the other humans, who are incomparably less exalted in the cosmic hierarchy. Since Sinombe evidently attributed divine powers to himself, perhaps it was on purpose that I was allowed to

the same as Taoist doctors, thus confirming fragmented indications of such similarities as my fieldwork and library research had accorded me (cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e)). After a period of repression during the Cultural Revolution, the temple community and Taoism in general were revived in the late 1980s. Is it possible that Sinombe’s claim of a cultic tributary link between Southern Africa and China was not mere flippancy?

¹ Cf. the *Foundation* books by Isaac Asimov (1951, 1952, 1953, 1972, 1986).

² Cf. Matt. 22: 41-42.

notice that the voice of Mwali when sounding from the holy of holiest of his shrine, bore a remarkable resemblance to the high priest's.

Considering that Sinombe was actually, at the time, one of the most powerful religious figures in a region extending over tens of thousands of square kilometres, we cannot simply dismiss his self-definition as a sign of megalomaniac religious delusion. Meanwhile his translation of his claimed epithet *Mbedzi* as 'Saviour' is utterly puzzling. He was mainly speaking in English, in northern Botswana where the dominant language is Tswana and the local languages Kalanga and Khwe (the variety of Central Khoi-San spoken here by the San, *i.e.* 'Basarwa' or 'Bushman'); he made reference to the Mwali cult (mainly a Zimbabwean cult largely administered in the Ndebele language although Zimbabwe's dominant language is Shona), to his own stay in Zimbabwe for many years, and to his village home among the Ila of Zambia, of which it is not sure if he ever returned there as an adult. In Tswana 'saviour' is *mmoloki*, in Kalanga *mpoloka*, in Shona *muponesi*, in Ndebele *umsindisi*,¹ all of which sound very different from *mbedzi*. Against the background of Sinombe's Christian education it is quite possible that his reference to the concept of 'saviour' exclusively draws on a contemporary Christian inspiration, but again I cannot rule out that more ancient ramifications are at play here, largely from outside the Christian realm. In cultic circles in the region, the exclamation *mbedzi* is sometimes heard from the mouths of adepts and clients in fond and humble reply to the cult leader's or diviner's words, more or less as an equivalent to *siavuma* ('we agree'), or to the Christian *amen*. In the Venda language, spoken in a considerable part of the Mwali cult's region, *Mumbedzi* designates a person from the north-eastern part (*Vhumbedzi*) of Vendaland,² and *Vhambedzi* an ethnic cluster of that name held to belong to the oldest Bantu-speaking inhabitants of the region.³ For Frobenius, whose insight into Zimbabwean esoteric knowledge was remarkable considering his expedition-type of data collection in the early twentieth century, *Mbedzi* was the name of a semi-legendary ancient kingdom established in the region by South Asians.⁴ Geographically this would tally with the connotation of *mbedzi* as 'north-eastern' (seen from Vendaland, distant India is to the north-east; and so is Sri Lanka, as a likely leg on the sea voyage from Indonesia to East Africa particularly Madagascar – the latter island was largely populated by sea voyages in the course of the first millennia BCE or CE). Could the word *Mbedzi* be cognate to *Buddha*,

¹ Matumo 1993; Hannan 1974; Doke *et al.* 1990.

² Van Warmelo 1989.

³ Ralushai & Gray 1977: 11.

⁴ Frobenius 1931. Breuil (1933) however, despite his great admiration for Frobenius' work and their occasionally close collaboration, was very dismissive of the idea of such a legendary kingdom. Perhaps the kingdom must be sought not on African soil but in South Asia itself. At the time evidence for the Indus civilisation was already available. The idea may receive a new lease of life with the recent, controversial discovery of the (allegedly incomparably ancient) Gulf of Khambat civilisation off the coast of Gujarat, West India.

Buddhist? In the course of this chapter we shall encounter the amazing extent to which India has been a detectable influence upon the *sangoma* cult.

In the Ancient Near East and the Mediterranean the concept of ‘saviour’ (‘redeemer’, Greek: *sōtēr*) was originally employed for gods specifically coming to the assistance of men, either for physical survival hence healing among the living, or for salvation in the form of life eternal after death. In Ancient Egypt, such a usage dates back to the First Dynasty, and has many later attestations, particularly in connection with the gods Wepwawet, Horus, and Osiris.¹ In popular Ancient Egyptian religion, a god Shed was venerated whose name simply means ‘Saviour’.² While the possible indebtedness³ of archaic and classical Greek religion to Ancient Egyptian religion is not the point here, we see in Greek religion the concept of the Saviour repeatedly applied to gods like Zeus (especially Zeus Sabazius), Asclepius, Heracles, the Dioscuri, invoked for healing and personal survival.⁴ Later, from Hellenistic times onwards, the concept of divine rescue was transferred to humans in the context of the royal cult (particularly in Ptolemaic Egypt, i.e. in the last three centuries before the Common Era), and then merged with Stoicism, mystery cults and Iranian eschatology to produce the Jewish-Christian concept of the world redeemer.⁵ Also in Israel several prophets and a king bore a name meaning ‘Saviour’, ‘Deliverer’.⁶ Beyond this specific conception of the ‘saviour’, the concept of salvation is widespread in the traditions of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, West and South Asia, albeit with a wide variety of meanings, and of cosmological and ethical implications.⁷

My hypothesis is that *Mbedzi* as used by Sinombe is an ancient, religiously-inspired South-Asia-orientated political title, which was retained and redefined when the Mwali cult came to occupy the niche of interregional political and economic relations left by the decline of effective statehood in Southern Zimbabwe and Northern Transvaal, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries CE, prior to the foundation of the Ndebele kingdom in the *mfecane*⁸ aftermath.

With this hypothesis I am leaving open the possibility that the Mwali cult (even if locally captured by a Zambian expatriate like Sinombe, with a Christian background, someone whose feats of religious entrepreneurship are well

¹ Griffiths 1980, 1951; Brunner 1958.

² Bonnet 1971: 676f, s.v. ‘Sched’.

³ According to Bernal’s (1987, 1991, 2001) thesis, reviving the claims already made by Herodotus, *Historiae*.

⁴ Cf. Herzog-Hauser 1931.

⁵ Volkmann 1979.

⁶ I.e. Hoshea, Oseha, Osee (Num. 13; 1 Chron. 27; 2 Kings 15, 17, 18; Neh. 10; Hos.).

⁷ Blackman 1921; Casartelli 1921; Gardner 1917; Gardner 1917a, 1917b; Geden 1921; Joseph 1921; Kirkpatrick 1921; Pinches 1921; Rhys Davids 1921; Sell 1921; Stuart Jones 1915; Youngert 1921.

⁸ The explosion of violence and conquest emanating from Shaka’s Zulu state, resulting a scatter of related Nguni states (with Ndebele and Ngoni ethnic designation) throughout Southern and South Central Africa. Cf. Beach 1980.

documented, over several decades, by the files of the Botswana Registrar of Societies)¹ may yet constitute a vehicle for the traditional transmission of esoteric knowledge from the distant past and from distant places.

This takes us to the second and even more puzzling of Sinombe's pronouncements, when lending his voice to Mwali, this time made not in private consultation and in his own name, but as the medium producing the voice of Mwali from the holy of holies at Nata, before an audience consisting of MmaChakayile and MmaTedi, and two Nata female acolytes, besides myself.

8.3. The high-priest's second riddle: The leopard skin as a sign of identity

During my sacred conversation at the shrine Mwali, part of the time speaking Dutch (as distinct from Afrikaans, English or Shona) gave the impression of being very well informed as far as my personal life and its dilemmas were concerned (after all, my assistant Ennie went to the same typing course as the high priest's daughter Jane). Then how in heaven could Mwali claim that the leopard skin is

‘the traditional ceremonial dress of the kind of people [I] belong to’?

This claim was taken so seriously that, before I had acquired a leopard skin to add to my *sangoma* uniform, I could not receive the shrine's final confirmation, even if this meant travelling another 400 kilometres and spending what in Botswana at the time amounted to more than a skilled worker's monthly salary on the trophy alone.

At the time I was only aware that, among *sangomas*, the leopard skin was considered a sign of high rank with undisclosed military connotations, and was certainly not a common item of paraphernalia. In fact, in the Francistown context I have only seen *sangomas* donning leopard skins in the specific context of Mr Sithole's lodge in the Masemenyenga suburb, where adepts were claimed to be possessed by Zulu warriors of the *mfecane*, from the first half of the nineteenth century. Sithole had given me my first *sangoma* consultation, but there was never any question of me or my wife joining his lodge. Shortly after MmaNdlovu's suspicious death, and months before I joined MmaChakayile's lodge, Sithole retired to Zimbabwe, leaving his thriving lodge in the hands of his female adepts who were effectively his wives. I maintained an infrequent and friendly visiting relationship with the latter, but there was never any suggestion that they were ‘my kind of people’ to the same extent, or even more so, than my fellow lodge members at MmaChakayile's. Was a rivalry, not between individual *sangomas* belonging to the same lodge, but between lodges, the root of the aggression which my leopard skin aroused at MmaChakayile's? I have no Zulu connections, neither are such connections claimed for the spirits reportedly coming through in my trance, and the

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1993b.

idea that the leopard skin was some sort of divine acknowledgement of Sithole's initial claim on me may be dismissed.

Speaking with such insistence and authority as it did, we can rule out the possibility that the oracle was consciously uncertain of the historical, ethnic and symbolic associations it yet pointed out and even made a condition for my entry and confirmation. The question remains: *what identity then had Mwali in mind for me?*

We have a number of options. In Southern African languages of the Bantu linguistic sub-family (a division of Niger-Congo), and also in the local English spoken by native speakers of Bantu, designations of specific collective identity (the equivalents of, for example, clan, tribe, nation, class, caste, race, species, phylum, etc.) tend to be used indiscriminately, so that the expression 'kind of people' does not elucidate whether the speaker is referring to an ethnic identity, a somatic identity, class identity, cultural identity, etc. The identity that was ascribed to me could in principle be intended to be:

- (a) *European identity*
- (b) *South African Afrikaner identity*
- (c) *A South Central African identity*
- (d) *A non-regional collective identity such as gender, religious denomination, class or caste.*

Which one could it be?

8.4. The leopard skin in the context of three socio-political identities

8.4.1. European identity?

Since I was being addressed in Dutch by the oracular Voice, a Dutch, Afrikaner, or general European, even White, identity is the first to come to mind.

Leopards are largely absent from West European, and by extension North Atlantic, culture today. In military marching bands the player of the principal kettledrum may occasionally wear around his waist the skin of a large feline predator, even in present times, when the background of such a custom is practically lost to all spectators, at least on the European mainland. The association between ceremonial display of martial prowess and the wearing of leopard skins was found in military circles throughout Europe in the Middle Ages and early modern times, when, for example, Central and Eastern European hussars' uniforms were adorned with leopard skins.¹ To this day this association may be more pronounced in Great Britain. Probably emulating a Sassānian model of nobility, William the Conqueror

¹ Exhibition n.d.

kept cheetahs as feline hunting dogs, and other kings and aristocrats throughout the European Middle Ages followed his example. Right into Napoleonic times the leopard has been the heraldic beast of the kings of England, and of England as a whole.¹ Hence it is eminently fitting that the British man-of-war that initiated the Chesapeake incident before the USA Virginia coast in 1807, was named *The Leopard*.

In former British colonies in Africa it is quite common among the uneducated to perceive all Whites implicitly as British, so there is the remotest possibility that the oracle took me for an Englishman; but if this were the case, why should I be addressed in Dutch at the shrine? This line of inquiry does not appear to solve our riddle, although the military association will have a surprise for us to be revealed towards the end of this chapter.

8.4.2. South African Afrikaner identity?

If a contemporary European more specifically British identity is to be ruled out, how about an Afrikaner one? The occasion that had brought me to become a *sangoma* was my exclusion from Francistonian African society on the grounds of my Afrikaner connotations as a White Dutchman. One of the spirits reported to come through in my trance is Afrikaans-speaking; he claims to be a collateral ancestor of mine (though undocumented in what small fragments of family history have come my way) and to have died in 'the' Boer War; probably the second war of that designation was meant, 1899-1902. In the Afrikaner context leopards are favourite hunter's quarries, and their skins (as among the Roman upper class in Antiquity)² are commonly seen as expensive ornaments for the Boer home. There they signify the capitalist farmer's triumph over the forces of nature, as well as his having effectively taken possession of the land even though this emphatically did not belong to his remote ancestors. At least one South African university (that of Witwatersrand) grants its doctoral alumni the right to wear a leopard skin as part of their academic dress. In doing so, this university (whose commendable intellectual and political record in the struggle against apartheid does not take away the fact that until the early 1990s it was largely White-orientated) is merely emulating a dress pattern which for centuries has been established among the Khoi-San-speaking and the Bantu-speaking segments of the population of Southern Africa: the leopard skin, worn as a *kaross*, i.e. fur cloak, is the prerogative of chiefs and notables.³ Among the Tswana (the dominant ethnic cluster and language group in Botswana), the leopard (*nkwe*) is a well-known totem.⁴ A totem is a natural species, natural feature or

¹ Barren 1961. Heraldic use of the leopard also in the famous Italian novel by di Lampedusa, *Il gatopardo* (1958).

² Richter 1979: 476.

³ Anonymous 1961b. However, caracal and wild cat share this honour with the leopard.

⁴ Schapera 1952. The more common modern rendering of the Tswana word for 'leopard' is: *lengau* (Matumo 1993), so with the noun class prefix *le-* attached and ending *-au* instead of *-we*.

abstract concept after which a well-defined set of local people have been named; association with a totem is usually acquired by birth, and imposes on the member of the totemic group not just a surname, but also lifelong obligations and prohibitions vis-à-vis both the totem and the other human members of the group.

Could Mwali, who on an earlier occasion (when I came as a supplicant to the Matopos Hills in 1989) allowed her senior cult personnel to turn me away on the grounds that I was White, in Nata, two years later (even though in the meantime Nelson Mandela had been released from prison) have come to dissimulate the considerable cultural discontinuity between Afrikaners and the other inhabitants of the Republic of South Africa, so that the leopard skin as a prerogative of prominent Blacks would be extended to White Afrikaners as a matter of course? This, again, is hardly to be believed, especially since on the same day that I was ordered to bring a leopard skin, the high priest had specifically talked to me about the surprise my fellow-Whites would demonstrate

‘when they would see me dabble in ‘*kaffir*’ [i.e. ‘‘nigger’’, ‘‘Black’’] things’, as a *sangoma*.’

8.4.3. A South Central African identity?

A third possibility is that with the leopard skin the ceremonial dress was meant, not of South African chiefs and notables to whom I clearly do not belong, but of South Central Africa and other parts of the continent to the north of Southern Africa. To this day leopard skins, worn *kaross*-style as cloaks or tied around the waist, have *in principle* formed important regalia among the Nkoya, into one of whose royal families I have been adopted. King Mwene Kahare Timuna (who died in 1955: my adopted father’s father) is the other ancestral spirit reported to speak through me when in trance, alternating with the Afrikaans-speaking one. Although since 1930 (when Sinombe was already a schoolboy) the uninhabitable Kafue National Park has created a massive psychological boundary between the two regions, Sinombe’s original home is in fact less than 100 km east of the Kahare royal capital, and among the Ila largely the same court culture prevails as among the Nkoya.¹

But again, the association is not very convincing.

With the enormous decline of the splendour of ceremonial court culture in the course of the twentieth century, the first time I set my eyes on a cured leopard skin in Nkoyaland was *nearly twenty years* after I began work there, during which time the royal court was my principal place of local residence! I saw this leopard skin during my first attendance at the Kazanga festival in 1989, when a handful of successful urbanised Nkoya, having formed the Kazanga Cultural Association a few years earlier, had come to organise an annual festival where Nkoya culture was put on display, including the four royal chiefs in state dress that had not been worn in public for decades.² Could Mwali have been so generous as to formally reinforce me (a

¹ Smith & Dale 1920; Fielder 1979; Jaspan 1953; Tuden 1970; van Binsbergen 1992b, 1986, 2003a.

² Cf. chapter 9.

White man who had stumbled into *sangomahood*) in my membership of the (Black) Nkoya people and especially of one of their royal families? In 1989, guided by Nkoya praise-songs and other oral traditions that I was to analyse extensively in my *Tears of Rain* (1992),¹ I considered *Conus* shell ornaments and the royal orchestra as the central insignia of royal power (incidentally both of them traits with Indian Ocean and Indonesian connotations – the ‘Mbedzi’ link does not stand on its own in South Central Africa). Having found that Mwene Kahare no longer possessed a *Conus* shell (Nkoya: *mpande*), and fearing that this state of affairs would embarrass him when making a public appearance at the 1989 Kazanga festival, I then formally presented him with the specimen I had received as a graduation gift from my doctoral supervisor Matthew Schoffeleers. I was still scarcely conscious of leopard skins in the Nkoya royal context, and although Mwene Timuna was manifesting himself in my trances in the Botswana *sangoma* context, the tangible, definitive confirmation of my adoption by the Nkoya royal family, 700 kilometres away from Nata, was only to take place a few years afterwards. It was at his deathbed in December 1993 that Mwene Kahare willed me his bow and arrows, and these I received half a year later from the hands of his successor and younger brother Mwene Kubama, who calls me *mwanami* (‘my son’, ‘my brother’s son’) and in protocolary acknowledgement of my status has insisted that in state processions I walk immediately behind him. Only close kin can inherit, *a fortiori*, when such personal and symbolically charged items are involved as a man’s bow and arrows. Besides representing a man’s life force, reproductive powers and organs, and hence rightful access to his wives, a king’s bow and arrows also symbolise rightful ownership of the land, which is ceremonially proclaimed by shooting an arrow into a tree.² However, the inheritance only made tangible what had for years been a public fact. Already in 1978 Mwene Kabambi insisted that I slept in the palace, vacating his bed for me. Whereas my eldest daughter daily played on his lap in the early 1970s, it was my middle daughter (born 1987) who was to receive, with official approval, the name of his ancestress Mwene Shikanda, and in Nkoyaland that daughter is generally treated as Queen Shikanda’s incarnation. In 1989, at a time of great petrol scarcity in Zambia, I had to drive my family to Lusaka and thence to Botswana, where we then lived; Mwene Kahare sent me to the nearest petrol station at the Kaoma junction of the Lusaka-Mongu road, 80 kilometres west of the Njonjolo palace and outside the area of his jurisdiction, with a stamped note in his own handwriting that read, in English:

‘Help this man. He is my son.’

Quod erat demonstrandum.

But again I do not think that here we are on the track to the solution of our riddle. In the struggle of multiplex identities that my ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ has been, one

¹ Van Binsbergen 1992b: *passim*.

² Van Binsbergen 1981a, 1992b.

of the most important moments for me was when, after graduation and after officiating at the ancestral shrine of MmaChakayile in Matshelagabedi, I was chided for speaking Tswana there: I should have spoken Dutch for I was speaking to my own ancestors, not hers. Could Mwali have overlooked what (although it has taken me many years, and Part III of this book, to find out) to the lesser, mortal members of the cult was so obvious – notably, that my primary identity was and remained outside Africa and that my ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ was part of a process not of losing, but of finding that identity? Again, I am inclined to dismiss as unconvincing the South Central African solution. But it remains possible that from my mind¹ Mwali, or his spokesman, has picked up what was certainly a latent desire then: to identify as a Nkoya prince.

Another possible but unlikely connection is along the following lines. In the middle of the nineteenth century CE, as part of the *mfecane*, the Lozi kingdom was taken over by Sotho-speaking Kololo from South Africa. The Kololo king subdued the Nkoya kings, so that even after Lozi restoration the Nkoya remained a subject group, perceived by the Ila as Lozi, especially since it was the Nkoya vassal King Shamamano who raided the Ila for cattle on behalf of the Lozi king at the end of the nineteenth century.² The Sotho ethnic and linguistic cluster is very distinct from the Nguni cluster, to which the leopard-skin-wielding kings belong that are celebrated at Sithole’s Masemenyenga lodge in Francistown. Admittedly, with a large degree of historical myopia and telescoping, Mwali, assisted or impersonated by the high priest Sithole of Ila extraction, might possibly transform my Nkoya association into a Lozi, therefore Kololo, therefore Nguni one; but that makes very little sense.

8.4.4. A non-territorial collective identity such as gender, religious denomination, class or caste?

Having failed to find convincing answers in information closely at hand within the original context of northern Botswana where the riddle of the leopard skin originated, it seems as if we are compelled to explore more fully the association with the leopard skin throughout the Old World cultural traditions, before we can decipher our riddle, or resign ourselves that solution is beyond our powers. What we are looking for is a historical cultural context that could have been known, in whatever indirect and distorted form, not only to the High God but also to the latter’s human representatives in the Mwali cult, and in which the leopard skin appears as the sign of an identity that could be argued to be mine.

So for over a year I plodded, in an exciting quest that kept me occupied night and day, through a large number of references to leopard-skin symbolism in ritual, cults and myths all over the Old World, from the remotest times to the present, in Africa, Asia and Europe. The leopard occurs in most of Africa and in the southern half of

¹ An extensive discussion of telepathy in the *sangoma* context is given in chapter 7.

² Van Binsbergen 1992b, and references cited there.

Asia, and only became extinct in Europe less than 10,000 years ago. The oldest recorded (at least, claimed) use of leopard skin turned out to be in a Mousterian, i.e. Late Neanderthaloid, context in southern France, more than 50,000 years Before Present.¹ So it stands to reason that many cultural and religious traditions throughout the Old World have been inspired by this beautiful predator. Retrieving most of the relevant archaeological and iconographical evidence through library research, and identifying the leopard's names throughout the Old World's language families, gradually afforded me a detailed, well documented, and amazingly coherent pattern of continuities through more than ten thousand years of cultural history – with greater depth and clarity than even my previous research on geomantic divination and general patterns of animal symbolism had provided, yet along much the same lines. Blind spots and puzzles in those previous projects gradually cleared up as, in the context of the leopard quest, I familiarised myself with state-of-the-art results of genetic and linguistic macrofamily research. This chapter outgrew its allotted size as a chapter, and became a book in its own right. However, while the general argument on leopard skin symbolism as a perspective on the world history of shamanism expanded, only one bit of evidence came up that seemed to answer the high priest's second riddle, helping me to identify the kind of people I allegedly belonged to, people whose ceremonial sign of office was the leopard skin.

8.5. Conclusion: The second riddle's solution

References to the leopard are virtually absent from the *Sacred Books of the East* (an incomplete but representative, hugely comprehensive body of formal religious literature encompassing the whole of Asia). The only exceptions are the following. Both the female and the male panther² feature in the sweetly edifying *Questions and Puzzles of Milinda the King* (dealing with the Greek king Menander/Milinda of Bactria – second century BCE – in conversation with a Buddhist sage), which however lack all shamanistic connotations.³ Those relating to the cat⁴ clearly only refer to the domestic cat, not to felines in general.

The tiger skin features prominently in the Ancient Hindu literature in a form that often suggests shamanistic themes – one that would be highly reminiscent of Ancient Egyptian and sub-Saharan African contexts if only leopard skin were substituted for tiger skin. In Ancient India, the tiger's skin is used at coronations.⁵ Here a shamanistic motif appears in connection with the god Indra: he becomes a tiger

¹ Cf. de Lumley 1972.

² Again, modern zoological taxonomy makes no distinction any more between leopard and panther, both being *Panthera pardus* or *Felis pardus*.

³ Rhys Davis 1988: II (vol. XXXVI) 285f.

⁴ Rhys Davis 1988: II (vol. XXXVI) 326f.

⁵ *Satapatha-Brahmana* V, Eggeling 1988: vol. XLI 81, 91-93, 96, 105, 105n; *Atharva-veda*, Bloomfield 1988, vol. XLII, 111f, (king is tiger), 378-380.

when *Soma* flows through him.¹ *Soma* is a sacred liquid pressed from a particular plant; it is also mead (honey-beer); the moon (whose speckles – said to form a human face in European folk traditions – associate it with the speckled leopard); and a god (of fairly controversial and transgressive behaviour) in his own right. A shamanistic sacrificial ritual of creation or rebirth is described;² if in this rite the entrails are not cleaned out it produces – as an undesirable result – a tiger³ or a jackal.⁴ A tiger is also produced from the contents of Indra's intestines when drinking *Soma*.⁵ Mention is made of the equally shamanistic concept of the man-tiger; the prescribed sacrifice to the latter happens to be 'the mono-maniac' (? , *sic*).⁶

And having learned to read 'leopard' for 'tiger', in a text whose redaction dates from the early first millennium CE in South Asia,⁷ thousands of kilometres away from Nata, Botswana, I finally stumbled on what is without the slightest doubt part of the answer to the Nata high priest's leopard-skin riddle:

In classical Hindu ritual it is

'the skin of a black antelope, a tiger, and a he-goat,'

which is stipulated for religious students of the three castes, the *Brâhmanas* (priests), the *Kshatriyas* (warriors), and the *Vaisyas* (commoners), respectively!⁸

Interestingly it is also the skin of a he-goat on which the sacrificer steps at the *Vâgapeya* (a form of *Soma* sacrifice). The antelope is singled out as 'one of the five animals' (the others are bee, elephant, butterfly and fish, they represent the five senses).⁹ Especially, the skin of a black antelope, representing the earth or (if in a pair) earth and heaven, plays a major role in Ancient Indian sacrifice (including the important *soma* sacrifice) and burial; relevant passages are to be found throughout the *Sacred Books of the East*.¹⁰

So through the injunction of wearing a leopard skin Mwali and the high priest were simply identifying me as a member of the *Kshatriya* warrior caste! If I had

¹ *Satapatha-Brahmana* V, Eggeling 1988: XLI 81.

² *Satapatha-Brahmana* V, Eggeling 1988: XLIV 203.

³ According to the index to vol. XLIV (*Satapatha-Brahmana* V, Eggeling 1988), p. 577 s.v. 'tiger'; and Winternitz 1988 s.v. 'animal'.

⁴ According to the actual text (as distinct from the index reference to this passage, cf. previous note) in Eggeling 1988: 203.

⁵ Eggeling 1988: 215.

⁶ *Satapatha-Brahmana*, Eggeling 1988: vol. XLIV 414.

⁷ Jolly 1988b: xxxii.

⁸ *Institutes of Vishnu*, XXVII 15-17: Jolly 1988a: 115.

⁹ Telang 1988: 155n.

¹⁰ See Winternitz 1988 s.v. antelope, p. 54, for detailed references. We may be reminded that in the Chinese tradition, the legendary ruler, culture hero and inventor of the eight *kua* (trigrams) Fu Hsi (modern rendering Fu Xi) wears both a leopard skin around his knees and an antelope skin around his shoulders; since Fu Hsi is doubtlessly shamanistic, the presence of the antelope skin in the South Asian tradition, too, may reflect a shamanistic vein. This is confirmed by the shamanistic elements in Hindu ritual involving the tiger skin.

come across this text passage at the beginning of my inquiry into the puzzling pronouncements of the Nata high priest, I would have stopped here: what he said about the leopard skin being the proper garment for ‘my kind of people’ echoes this stipulation from the sacred laws of India, and its caste system, of which no publicly recognised traces are ever affirmed, to my knowledge, in Southern African society today – while another caste system, that of apartheid, was about to be wiped out there in the early 1990s, when the high priest pronounced his second riddle. And now for the first time I can make sense of a bit of information that I received in the lodge milieu when I asked why I should get a leopard skin: *the leopard skin was understood to be a sign of military rank* – but I could not see the obvious, given the reliance, at the lodge, on unarticulated teaching through example rather than through words,¹ given the general secrecy that surrounded the Mwali cult in Francistown and the Northeast District except at the *sangoma* lodges, and given my own resistance vis-à-vis the military implications of the specific details of my *sangomahood*. The envy of my fellow-*sangomas* at MmaChakayile’s lodge is now understandable: whereas to me the relatively exalted rank of the warrior caste was granted, all the others had been found to be merely of commoner status, condemned to the he-goat skins of the victims they sacrificed at their coming-out ceremony as *sangomas*. It is now also clear why either of my two possessing spirits – one a Boer soldier, the other a Nkoya king known for his fondness of hunting rifles – wanted me (in MmaDlozi’s interpretation) to carry a ceremonial gun.

It is illuminating, though disconcerting, to find a riddle generated within a Southern African cult that has no explicit or conscious South Asian links, solved by an ancient South Asian text.

But this by no means exhausts the South Asian parallels in *sangomahood*: the name Mwali (cf. Kali) for a formidable mother goddess whose sacred colour is black, the use of scapulars crossed over the breast as a sign of studentship (*utwaza*), the beaded string as a marker of earlier sacrifices, the format of the lodges as cultic centres (cf. *ashrams*), the collective chanting of hymns, the performance of menial tasks during studentship (cf. *seva*), the use of black cloaks and of rods as signs of religious office (although the black cloaks are in fact even more reminiscent of Taoism!), prostration as a ritual gesture, processions of lodge members as a public appropriation of space, the imposed celibacy during the training period, the belief in personal reincarnation, the use of fly-whisks as paraphernalia, etc. The hymn ‘*Sala-Salani*’ cited in chapter 5 has a close parallel in the well-known Heart Sutra of South Asian Buddhism;² although the wording of the *sangoma* hymn is sufficiently general and of all times to allow for apparent parallels without actual historical connections.

¹ See section 6.10.

² Cf. <http://cres.anu.edu.au/~mccomas/heartsutra/index.html>. This was pointed out to me by my student Luca Domenichini, at a time (2000) when the thought of detailed South Asian parallels in *sangomahood* still struck me as utterly fantastic.

But the solution to our riddle, although undeniable, is only partial, for the high priest was emphatically not speaking within an Indian frame of reference, and he gave no reasons for my being classified as a member of the warrior caste. We shall yet have to continue our quest, if we want to explain how an Indian cultic idiom featuring tiger skins could possibly install itself as an African one featuring leopard skins. Having cast my net very widely, I did catch the fish I was originally after, but unexpectedly a treasure was found tangled in the net that I would be a fool to throw back into the sea. While *Intercultural encounters* goes to the press, I have already drafted *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots*, which relates the full details of this further quest into the ramifications of Old World symbolism, spirituality, and shamanism.

Thus the intercultural encounter that my 'becoming a *sangoma*' consisted in, turned out to be not just between me and the local ritual traditions of Southern Africa – it revealed, in itself, other similar encounters, between Africa and Asia, against the background of an evolving cultural history of mankind characterised by the dynamic interplay between sameness and difference, continuity and innovation, diffusion and transformative localisation. And the two World Wars which, in the first half of the twentieth century, had shaped the fate of my ancestral family in Europe, warping the lives of my parents, wrecking the family into which I was born, and adding (since both my grandfathers, and my mother's ex-husband whose name I bore for purely administrative reasons in the first year of my life, had been soldiers) a decidedly military dimension to my ancestry which for most of my life I could only reject, – it had all come back through the *sangoma* cult's transformative power, elevated to an emblem of high office, election, interculturality, understanding, resignation, acceptance.

We are ready now to continue our intercultural philosophical lessons, on a less personal plane.

PART IV.

FROM CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY TO INTERCULTURAL
PHILOSOPHY

Sensus communis or *sensus particularis*?

Immanuel Kant in Africa

9.1. Introduction

The point of departure¹ in Kant's theory of *sensus communis* as set out in his *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* (originally published 1790) is what he claims to be the subjective necessity of the individual's aesthetic judgement. Such necessity implies that the individual cannot afford to consider her or his judgement as merely idiosyncratic, but has to assume that it is shared by all others.

Let us try to think along with Kant on this point. Who are these others? They are the members of the community to which the judging individual belongs. The aesthetic judgement thus has a vital social implication beyond the use of individual rational faculties of articulating and justifying a sense of beauty. It is in the aesthetic judgement that the sense of community is imposed as a self-evident and necessary reality upon the individual. The sense of beauty is at the same time a sense of social belonging, of social identity. In the aesthetically judging and the identity-affirming individual consciousness, neither the aesthetic judgement nor the social belonging can be tolerated to appear in a relativist light. The individual cannot bear to see his aesthetic judgement reduced to a mere personal idiosyncrasy but has to be convinced that his beauty is necessarily everybody's beauty. In the same way the individual must experience his sense of social belonging (that, still according to Kant, is implied in his experience of beauty) not as the outcome of a strategic and contingent choice leaving open a whole range of possible other social identities and commitments that might be tried at some later stage – no, at the subjective level the sense of social belonging is as absolutely inescapable as, allegedly, the sense of beauty.

A present-day social scientist like myself looks with a mixture of profound admiration and intense bewilderment at Kant's views here.

¹ Kant 1983b.

9.2. Why the social sciences have difficulty appreciating Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement

Bewilderment in the first place. Kant's critical thought is not an explicit and recognised part of the social-science canon (however diverse) today. Any social-science perspective on Kant therefore would mean trying to bring Kant in from the outside – inventing ways of accommodating, isolating or annihilating the alien body of Kant's critical thought¹ within a more familiar disciplinary framework of social science. Although Kant's critical writings were unmistakably an influence on the founding fathers of the social sciences (Marx, Durkheim and Weber), yet for all three authors this influence was highly indirect – filtered through de Bonald and de Maistre (in the case of Durkheim), through Hegel (in the case of Marx), and through Marx and German *Kulturphilosophie* (c. 1900) in the case of Weber. There has been far greater continuity between Kant's pre-critical writings on anthropology, history, geography, etc., and the emergent social sciences of the nineteenth century; but these pre-critical writings have been largely ignored by twentieth-century philosophy as obsolete, occasionally racist, and essentially non-philosophical in the sense of falling short of the canon defined, for all of subsequent Western philosophy, by Kant himself in his critical writings. More in general, the process of intra-disciplinary professionalisation of the social sciences especially during the first half of the twentieth century has meant that these sciences have sought to create ever greater distance between themselves and older, possibly rival, disciplines in academia: *belles lettres*, the arts, history, philosophy. This applies especially to the Anglo-Saxon social-science tradition that has also prevailed in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, but also to the German and French national social-science traditions. For the social scientist it is difficult to conceive that Kant's critical investigation of pure knowledge, practical knowledge, and judgement does constitute the foundation and the touchstone of modern thought. For did not Kant write a hundred years before the social sciences really took wing? Had Kant therefore not inevitably to write in an idiom that favours a classical individual-centred rationality, virtually without any recognition of the ways in which social institutions and social processes structure and restrain individual consciousness, impose and warp judgement, contaminate it with collective representations (Durkheim), and with subconscious reference to groups and individuals the social actor would like to belong to or from which he seeks in vain to dissociate himself? What would remain of Kant if we tried to rewrite his work in the idiom of today's social science? Does not a neo-Marxist or functionalist sociology of knowledge, *à la* Mannheim² or Merton³, render the *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* as hopelessly obsolete as its date of original publication would suggest to any serious social scientist – who prefers not to cite work more than

¹ Kant 1983b, 1983c, 1983d.

² Mannheim however was greatly inspired by Kant: cf. Mannheim 1922.

³ Merton 1968.

twenty years old. The democratic and relativist Tylorian concept of culture that became standard in the social sciences,¹ although harking back to Herder, did not find a promising early exponent in Kant and was not adopted in *Kulturphilosophie*. Confronted with the title *Culture and Practical Reason* the contemporary anthropologist thinks not of Kant in Königsberg² but of Marshall Sahlins in Chicago.³ Are not the repeated allegations⁴ to the effect that racist elements are contained in Kant's pre-critical work sufficient reason for a social scientist today not to bother with him any more? Does not *La Distinction*, Bourdieu's⁵ sociological reading of *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, contain everything that could possibly still be worthwhile in Kant's critical assessment of aesthetic judgement? For the social scientist the sociologistic reduction inherent in Bourdieu's argument would not so much constitute a travesty of Kant (as it certainly is from a philosophical perspective), but a salvage operation of what little of Kant could still be used in the social science of taste today.

Of course I am deliberately exaggerating. One notable exception to the anthropological aloofness vis-à-vis Kant has been Mary Douglas, the grand old lady of British anthropology, who cites him repeatedly.⁶ Moreover, in the most recent decades the social sciences, having established themselves securely in academia, have opened up again for philosophical inspiration, and this is likely to lead to their renewed appreciation of Kant, as mediated through popular twentieth-century philosophers like J.-F. Lyotard, G. Deleuze, H. Arendt, and S. Žižek.⁷

Three elements in particular are missing from Kant's theory if, stripped of its project as a philosophical theory of transcendence, it were to be reformulated as a mere theory of the production of the social.

In the first place, as I have already indicated, the strictly rational consciousness of Kant's individual make that individual a sociological monster and even (as a whole range of philosophical critics has argued, from Scheler, Freud, Sartre right down to Robin Schott)⁸ a philosophical monster.

Secondly, the community that is implied in that individual's aesthetic judgement is supposed to extend infinitely so as to encompass the whole of humankind, without

¹ Cf. chapter 15.

² Kant's place of birth and work, which he hardly ever left in his life; later called Kaliningrad.

³ Sahlins 1976; cf. Drechsel 1984. Sahlins' title was a deliberate non-reference to Kant, to which I shall briefly come back below.

⁴ Cf. Rose 1990; Eze 1996, 1997b; Bernal 1987. For a partial refutation with emphasis on Kant's critical writings, cf. Palter 1996b; Blok 1997.

⁵ Bourdieu 1979.

⁶ E.g. Douglas 1984.

⁷ Lyotard 1986; Deleuze 1963; Žižek 1993; Arendt 1982; for further recent philosophical reflections on Arendt's and Lyotard's appropriations of Kant, cf. Dostal 1984; Flynn 1988; Ingram 1988.

⁸ Schott 1988.

subdivisions of a somatic, national, ethnic, regional, professional, class or gender nature. This is the only position Kant can take if he is not to make nonsense of his transcendental project. However, if we were to take Kant's philosophical exposé for an empirical description of the social processes of aesthetic production and aesthetic reception, such a view of social life would only apply in closed and homogeneous, totally autarkic, local communities. Under the designation of 'primitive isolates', such communities were for a long time paradigmatic in cultural anthropology, but their existence could only be postulated as a theoretical possibility. For the anthropologist's participating both in her original (usually North Atlantic) community and in a supposedly isolated local community under study, her very access to the latter, and her commuting between that community and academia, would already introduce a plurality of life-worlds (i.e. alternatives of experience, judgement and truth), into that local community. And of course, closer historical analysis would bring out the fact that, since such a local community clearly shares in *anatomically modern humanity's* genetic make-up, language capabilities, faculties of discursive thought, traditions of tool making and food production – in a whole range of human achievements, most of them less than 200,000 years old – it could never have been absolutely and totally isolated in the first place. Anyway, even marginally primitive isolates have long been supplanted by peasant communities that, however much inclined to a subjective perception of self-sufficiency, would meet the standard anthropological definition of being 'part societies with a part culture'. There is overwhelming empirical evidence that in virtually all situations today, humans identify with a community that they consciously and undeniably perceive as a subset of humanity, not as the whole of humanity.¹ In such a situation the subjective necessity of the individual's aesthetic judgement creates not one clearly delineated and unequivocal community, but a field of tension: on the one hand, in the abstract sense, the individual may have to abide by Kant and take his aesthetic judgement so absolutely seriously as to imply the whole of humankind in it; but, on the other hand,² the individual cannot always ignore the fact that others in his immediate or remote social environment would unavoidably disagree with his judgement; by virtue of this, some – or many – people opt out of the universal community which his judgement has implied, and they instead throw him back upon the awareness of a less than universal judgement backed up by a less than universal community. Whether this less than universal community turns out to be based on class, gender, regional ties, or whatever other selection and mobilisation criterion, the effect of its

¹ Cf. Dunbar 1995, 1997; Hamilton 1964.

² As Kant himself was well aware:

‘...since under these empirical conditions a Black person must have a different normative idea of the beauty of the human form from a White person – a Chinese a different from a European’

original: ‘daher ein Neger notwendig unter diesen empirischen Bedingungen eine andere Normalidee der Schönheit der Gestalt haben muß, als ein Weißer, der Chinese eine andere, als der Europäer.’

Kant 1983b: §17; my translation.

being less than universal is that the *sensus communis* implied in the abstract and absolute judgement, is confronted with a *sensus particularis*¹ implied by the contrastive, alternative judgement. In other words, Kant's notion of community is too monolithic, and does not take into account the complexity and plurality of communities, identities, reference groups, that are constantly being constructed and discarded in the social process. Under modern conditions of globalisation, such an argument would apply *a fortiori*.

Situating the individual in this kaleidoscopic social process of incessant construction and dissolution of multiple communities, immediately brings to mind the third objection: not only Kant's community but also Kant's *individual* is too monolithic, too much integrated and consistent, that is, in full accordance with the consistent rationality attributed to that individual. In social practice, many people have totally committed themselves to one community but beyond that one community happen to be aware of a plurality of communities of others. What is more, most people turn out to have committed themselves to more than one community, cherishing several identities in that connection, in such a way that each identity is either activated or latent depending on the social expectations and pressures to which the person is subjected in a particular place and at a particular time. The recognition of shifting and plural social identities united in one and the same person, and alternately activated according to the different specific roles that this individual plays serially in the context of specific communities, in the course of a life, a year, even a day, would render the step between aesthetic judgement and community rather less compelling and unequivocal than Kant suggests. Constantly aware of alternatives in oneself because of the non-monolithic nature of the self with its many social roles within the many communities in which to play these roles, the sense of community generated by implication on the basis of aesthetic judgement is likely to be less than total. Admittedly, to some extent the awareness of multiple, incompletely integrated identities united in the same person is typically an achievement of postmodern social science and philosophy reflecting on postmodern society. However, multiplicity of roles and social contexts, and the awareness of alternatives, is demonstrably a feature that all societies display, albeit in varying degrees; postmodernity may have helped us to perceive this feature, but has not created it.

9.3. What Kant has yet to offer to the social sciences

If I had stopped here, I would never have made the grade from social scientist to philosopher. But in addition to bewilderment, there is profound admiration for Kant's position. Anglophone-orientated social scientists of my generation were, early in their careers, exposed to Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery* as the

¹ Cf. Wiredu 1996, cf. 1998.

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paroxysm of epistemological sophistication that it was then;¹ we were scarcely aware that the book was rooted in continental German-language philosophy, let alone of its major indebtedness to Kant despite Popper's shift from synthetic to analytic *a priori*. Reading Kant after Popper is an overwhelming intellectual and aesthetic experience, like steering a reliable small ship out from the river and onto the open sea. Admittedly, Kant's world is that of the conscious rational individual, and he can scarcely make the concept of the social and the meta-individual, the super-organic, work for him (or the subconscious, for that matter, as a force frequently overriding conscious rational thought). But whereas the discovery and scientific articulation of the social can be said to have been the fundamental project and merit of the social sciences, this has usually led to a reductionist reification best exemplified with Durkheim's undeservedly famous adage

'Social facts are things'.²

Well, we know that social facts, i.e. institutions and the institutional facts (Searle)³ they create, are not things of the same order of tangible reality as a rock, a petal, a baby, a farmhouse, a microcomputer. On the contrary, social facts are merely invisible, largely language-based networks of social relationships, that have an impact on our lives because they weave for us the social illusion as taken for granted, as inescapable even, suggesting at the level of our subjective consciousness a distinct plane of institutional reality hovering over us, *one elusive quantum leap away* from what is very much the world of Kant's critical project: our *individual* forms of knowledge, evaluations, motivations and actions. Methodological individualism⁴ has repeatedly reminded us that the social sciences, despite their voluminous output of social description, theory and method over more than a hundred years, have far from solved the fundamental problem of how precisely to account for the forms and transformations of the social on the basis of its being generated in the context of individual consciousness and action. Parsons⁵ has made us understand that the fundamental and unsolved problem of the social sciences has always been: *how is society possible?* On this point Kant's suggestion in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* deserves to make a fresh impact on the social sciences. In addition to Marx's relations of production, Durkheim's collective representations,⁶ and Weber's subtle analyses of rationality, authority, power, class as lifestyle, and above all the social circulation of meaning⁷ – *Kant's view of the social as necessarily implied in*

¹ Popper 1959.

² 'Les faits sociaux sont des choses', Durkheim 1897.

³ Searle 1969.

⁴ Agassi 1960; Lukes 1970.

⁵ Parsons 1937.

⁶ Which concept, not without indebtedness to Kant, does for the religious field what Kant proposes to do for the aesthetic field; cf. Durkheim 1912.

⁷ Weber 1947; Gerth & Mills 1968.

aesthetic judgement looks for the social in a direction hitherto largely ignored by the social sciences. For in their professionalising entrenchment the social sciences have all but lost, among other things, the capability of a sophisticated, non-reductionist discourse on art.

What if it were true that not production (Marx), the sacred (Durkheim) or meaning (Weber), but *beauty* could be argued to be the prime mover of social life? But no, that would be another reductionism. Let us instead be content if a perspective on aesthetic judgement could at least suggest some additional insight into the social, which, along with truth, death, love, birth, and God, ranks among the central mysteries of human life.

If I have suggested in this section what the social sciences might yet derive from Kant, in the previous, critical sociological section I suggested three specific points in which present-day social-science insights would have something to contribute to an attempt to take Kant's theory of *sensus communis* into the third millennium: the non-rational dimensions of the individual consciousness; the plurality of communities; and the plural and situational nature of personal identity.

Let us try to bring these general considerations to life in the course of an excursion to western Zambia, where we are going to examine a social context for the production, experience and judgement of art, specifically music and dance.¹

9.4. The Nkoya people and their Kazanga festival: Symbolic production and *sensus communis* in western central Zambia

My case study concerns an ethnic association in modern Zambia, and its annual festival. The African people whom I vicariously present as the subjects of my argument in majority identify as belonging to a nation called 'Nkoya'. They are invariably non-academicians; many are semi-literate or even illiterate, and any rendering of their ideas in terms of contemporary global academic discourse would have to be largely based on an externalising anthropological hermeneutics to be applied to their forms of social and political action, organisation, and symbolic production. In over a quarter of a century of close association and participation I believe I have understood something of how they construct their life-world on the basis of notions of community that have both artistic and political aspects.

In the villages in the early 1970s, I was at first deeply impressed, and sought successfully to engage myself, in the Nkoya *sensus communis*. By that time Nkoyaland was ethnically and culturally highly homogeneous. The chief, his council and the village headmen had a tight grip on day-to-day village life, which further revolved on the succession of the agricultural, hunting and fishing seasons. Kinship festivals (girl's initiation ceremonies, weddings, name-inheritance ceremonies,

¹ Cf. Brown 1984; van Binsbergen 1992a = 1994c, 1999b. On the Nkoya also: van Binsbergen 1977, 1979a, 1985a, 1986, 1992b, 1993c, 1994b, 1996f, 1999b, 2003c.

funerals) and healing cults offered frequent opportunities for all villagers to engage in musical and dancing activities within a circle of equals who were long-time associates, speaking the same language and liking the same songs and drum rhythms. Every Nkoya adult and child was a competent and frequent musical performer. What is more, administrators, educationalists and development workers in the district entertained, not without grounds, the stereotype of Nkoya children staying away from school in order to dance and make music. And in fact musical expertise was such that throughout western Zambia royal orchestras were staffed by Nkoya musicians singing Nkoya praise-songs their royal audience could not even understand. At the collective musical and dancing events, improvised jesting songs were the idiom to exercise social control and to articulate competition between kin groups. Nkoya peasant society was by no means a primitive isolate, but the sense of community celebrated in these expressions was inner-directed, neither addressing strangers nor being challenged by strangers. In the villages, being Nkoya was virtually synonymous with being human, and the very great emphasis on music and dance made Nkoya society, in retrospect, appear as a textbook illustration (duly simplified for social-science consumption) of Kant's theory of *sensus communis*.

By the end of the 1980s however this situation had considerably changed and I became aware that my earlier appreciation of Nkoya life in terms of an aesthetically underpinned *sensus communis* had given way to one in which *sensus particularis* had become far more conspicuous. Class formation, the local emergence of commercial farming and the opening up of the region for modern political relations, had pushed the traditional ways of generating *sensus communis* through music and dance to the background. Instead of being taken for granted, in other words being lived, at the many festive moments of village life, music and dance were now predominantly *performed* at a brand-new annual festival, before an audience largely consisting of ethnic and cultural strangers. Aesthetics were still involved, but it now combined much more clearly *sensus communis* with *sensus particularis*, where Nkoya specificity was explicitly mediated, as a minority expression of great aesthetic value, to the outside worlds recognised to be committed to other identities than the Nkoya one, and to have other aesthetic judgements than those prevailing in the time-honoured thatched men's shelters, kitchens, hunter's camps and royal councils of the Nkoya.

What had happened? In western Zambia a large number of ethnic identities circulate, among which that of the Lozi (Barotse, Luyi) is dominant because of its association with the Luyana state. The latter had its pre-colonial claims confirmed and even expanded with the establishment of colonial rule in 1900, resulting in the Barotseland Protectorate, which initially coincided with North-western Rhodesia, and after Zambia's independence (1964) became that country's Western Province. Lozi arrogance, the local people's limited access to education and to markets, and the influence of a fundamentalist Christian mission, stimulated a process of ethnic awakening. As from the middle of the twentieth century more and more people in eastern Barotseland and adjacent areas came to identify as 'Nkoya'. In addition to

the Nkoya language, and to a few cultural traits recognised as proper to the Nkoya (even if these traits have a much wider distribution in the region), royal ‘chiefs’, although incorporated into the Lozi aristocracy, have constituted major condensation points of this identity. The usual pattern of migrant labour and urban–rural migration endowed this identity with an urban component, whose most successful representatives distinguished themselves from their rural Nkoya nationals in terms of education, income and active participation in national politics. While the Lozi continued to be considered as the ethnic enemies, a second major theme in Nkoya ethnicity was to emerge: *the quest for political and economic articulation with the national centre*, bypassing the Lozi whose dominance at the district and provincial level dwindled only slowly. In this articulation process the chiefs (lacking education, economic and political power, and being the prisoners of court protocol) could only fulfil a symbolic function. The main task fell to the urban Nkoya ‘elite’ (in fact, mainly lower- and middle-range civil servants and other salaried workers), and with this task in mind the most prominent among them formed the Kazanga Cultural Association in the early 1980s. In subsequent years, this association has provided an urban reception structure for prospective migrants, has contributed to Nkoya Bible translation and to the publication of ethno-historical texts, has assumed a considerable role at the royal courts next to the traditional royal councils, and within various political parties and publicity media has campaigned against the Lozi and for the Nkoya cause. The association’s main achievement, however, has been the annual organisation (since 1988) of the Kazanga festival, in the course of which a large audience (including Zambian national dignitaries, the four Nkoya royal chiefs, Nkoya nationals and outsiders) for two days is treated to a fairly complete overview of current Nkoya songs, dances and staged rituals. Of course what we have here is a form of bricolage and an invention of tradition. Today’s wider socio-political and economic context is dominated by intercontinental financial institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) via the post-colonial state; and by global conventions of commodity style in clothing, music, etc. as mediated by radio, television, books and magazines. As a result there is merely the *illusion* of continuity vis-à-vis nineteenth-century *Kazanga*. It would even have been impossible to revive the nineteenth-century *Kazanga* harvest festival completely, which comprised not several but only one royal, and not just the pouring of sacrificial libations in the form of home-made beer, but also the immolation of slaves.

Although present-day *Kazanga* is not a faithful copy of the original model, few local people notice the difference because the festival had not been held for close to a century. It is not exactly an academic notion of authenticity that bothers the closely packed crowds of local spectators, the great majority of them native speakers of the Nkoya language, identifying with the Nkoya ethnic identity – people whose National Registration Card lists one of the Nkoya traditional rulers as their chief, and the area of his jurisdiction as their rural home. When one mingles with these crowds, there cannot be the slightest doubt that many of these spectators experience great beauty when, in accordance with the *Kazanga* festival’s programme, item after item of

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‘Nkoya traditional culture’, i.e. originally ritual and ceremonial music and dance in a new performative format, is being presented. People cry out in excitement, point out nice details to each other, and shed tears. Many rock their bodies inadvertently to the familiar music that the local musicians (most of them mere boys) play on their village-made xylophones and drums. Many appear to be uncomfortable with the role of passive, incompetent spectator to which the tight orchestration by the festival’s leadership reduces them, and they occasionally join in the singing and the dancing as if this were not an annual festival recorded by the media, but simply a village ceremony like the scores of such ceremonies in which I participated during local fieldwork a few decades ago.

It is the interplay between *sensus communis* and *sensus particularis* that constitutes the Kazanga festival’s most striking characteristic.

Certainly the newly revived festival does operate on the basis of an unbounded inclusiveness: not only members of the Nkoya ethnic group, but all other locals are welcome, as well as ethnic strangers residing at the district capital, officers and soldiers from the nearby army barracks (who at other times are considered a public nuisance because of their unquenchable sexual appetites which they tend to direct at local women), regional entrepreneurs and petty politicians, civil servants, medical personnel, missionaries, and perhaps a few tourists; some of the obvious outsiders stand out not only because of their expensive attire but also because of their exotic, White somatic features. Two kinds of outsiders are especially welcome. There are, in the first place, representatives of the national media who (after many decades when the Nkoya identity and its language were totally excluded from national media and from educational institutions) since the festival’s inception in 1988 have given it a broad media coverage, and thus have greatly boosted ethnic pride and national recognition. And secondly, national-level politicians, including a handful of cabinet ministers and junior ministers, have from the inception formed the guests of honour at the Kazanga festival. They are groomed and pampered during every minute of their visit, and the obvious goal is to trade the immaterial expressive production of the festival (music, dance, art, beauty) for more tangible tokens of special attention from the national political centre: development projects enhancing the local villagers’ access to income, markets, commodities; ethnic recognition to make up for a century of humiliation at the hands of the Lozi who were privileged by the colonial state; and individual patronage of politicians to be extended to the Kazanga leadership themselves.

This inclusiveness carries a hidden message that may well be explicitised in terms of *sensus communis*. For, if the Nkoya performers, producers and spectators of the Kazanga festival programme would not be convinced that what was a powerful source of artful beauty to them (Nkoya music and dance) could also be communicated across the boundaries of Nkoya ethnic identity and be admired by ethnic and cultural strangers, then the whole idea of the Kazanga festival as an exchange of performance for development benefits would be defeated. Clearly, if the Nkoya experience their music and ceremonies as beautiful, this implies to some

extent that they take these to be beautiful for all of humankind. Nor is this for them merely a contemporary notion imposed by peripheral globalisation; it is commonly held among the Nkoya that in the early nineteenth century the Lozi king humbly requested Nkoya court music to be put at his disposal as most powerful sign of his royal status. This tradition (recorded in the standard collection of Nkoya ethnohistory, *Likota lya Bankoya*)¹ implies that in the past the Lozi considered the Nkoya equal if not superior to themselves; all the more reason for the Nkoya today to resent it that the Lozi have come to consider the Nkoya as less than human – as slaves, as dogs.

Now for the *sensus particularis* aspect. In terms of admission to the festival and enjoyment of its performances, there is a formal all-inclusiveness – provided the strangers remain strangers, and by their very presence enable the Nkoya to articulate themselves in their particular ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity. There is an emphatic particularism when it comes to the production of beauty in this context. The strangers are welcome as strangers only. There is not the slightest invitation to them to cross the boundary between Nkoya and non-Nkoya: they are not jokingly drawn into the dancing groups, are not presented with honorary Nkoyahood; there is even no attempt to introduce them to the specific local background knowledge needed in order to understand and appreciate the rich performative repertoire. Among the performers and producers only those are allowed who are socially recognised as Nkoya, who speak the Nkoya language (though not necessarily as a first language), who can claim descent (socially recognised descent, at least, not necessarily biological) from at least one Nkoya parent, and who are conversant with the details of Nkoya life at the level of family relations, productive activities, chieftainship and its history, puberty ceremonies, hunting and healing ritual. Contrary to the Kazanga festival in the nineteenth century (when it was an exclusive celebration of one royal incumbent's power among his or her subjects) the present-day festival is outward-looking in that it would be pointless if exclusively performed among ethnic insiders – hence it implies the generation of *sensus communis* among a set of people comprising both locals and outsiders. At the same time, the festival hinges on the creation of a boundary between ethnic and cultural insiders and outsiders, it presents performances whose *raison d'être* for the performers is not only that they are beautiful but also that they are 'ours' (of the performers) and not 'theirs' (not of the outsider spectators). In the Kazanga festival the dissociation between the Nkoya insiders and their outsider guests is emphatically constructed. Kazanga articulates *sensus communis* in emphatic tension with *sensus particularis*.

¹ Nkoya text and English translation in: van Binsbergen 1992b.

9.5. The Kazanga festival and constraints of artistic production: Identity, commodification, and embodiment

Another thing becomes clear when we consider the Kazanga festival as a focus of artistic production. The music and dance the performers produce, and the image of the traditional ruler that is at the centre of the festival performances (for Kazanga is a transformed *royal* festival, which may have derived originally from the Ancient Egyptian *sed* festival),¹ are in its present form modern constructs and not time-honoured givens of a local cultural repertoire of the *longue durée*. Nor could they very well be, since the ethnonym Nkoya itself is less than a century old. Kazanga is part of the construction of an ethnic identity – *sensus particularis* is at its very heart.

9.5.1. Production of identity in the Kazanga festival

The Kazanga festival revolves around the mediation of the local Nkoya identity towards the national, and, by implication, worldwide space – a mediation that is to transmute the local symbolic production (one has hardly any other local products eligible for exchange with the outside world) into a measure of political and economic power via access to the national centre. Besides the selection and *presentation* of culture, this involves the *transformation* of culture: the Kazanga festival has the appearance of presenting items of traditional Nkoya culture, but in fact all these elements have been largely transformed towards a performative format, orchestrated, directed, rehearsed, subjected to the streamlined ordering by an organising elite and its mobilising and mediating ambitions. The models for this performative format derive from radio, television, the world of Christian missions, agricultural shows, state intervention in national ethnic artistic production through music and dance, and intercontinental pop media culture.

The Nkoya identity that is thus put on display is not only recent and situational, but also ‘virtual’,² in the sense that it does not coincide at all any more with what the participating and performing villagers in fact experience as the self-evident ordering (in terms of space, time and social relations) of village life, in whose context truly historic forms of symbolic production are pursued (superficially similar to the forms produced at the festival, but on closer scrutiny fundamentally different) that might be more properly termed ‘Nkoya traditional culture’. The artistic production during the *Kazanga* festival is somehow suspended in the air. Yet (or perhaps precisely because of these features) it is passionately acclaimed among the very villagers. Kazanga goes through the motions of *sensus communis* in order to bring about *both sensus communis* and its opposite, *sensus particularis*.

¹ From the first dynasty onwards, the Sed festival (*Hb Sd*) was the major royal festival to celebrate the Ancient Egyptian king’s thirtieth year on the throne. For a recent treatment in context, cf. Gohary 1992; Kemp 1995; Wilkinson 2001. Older sources include: Murnane 1981; Murray 1932; Spencer 1978; Bonnet 1971; Brovarski 1984; Martin 1984; Hornung & Staehelin, 1974. Van Binsbergen, forthcoming (a) discusses the Egyptian/Nkoya parallel in detail. Elsewhere I note a close Tanzanian parallel (van Binsbergen 2003c).

² Cf. van Binsbergen 1997f, 1998b.

9.5.2. Commodification in the Kazanga festival

Artistic presentation in the context of the Kazanga festival has become a form of commodification. The performative format anticipates on the expectations of the visiting non-Nkoya elite, and has to produce goodwill and rapprochement, some sort of symbolic ready cash, to be effective within the wider world of political and economic power that is represented by these dignitaries. There is also more tangible cash involved: the performers are paid a little for their services. Moreover the performances take place in a context that is increasingly dominated by characteristic commodities from the global consumerist culture of reference: supported – and this is absolutely unheard of in the villages – by public address systems, while all royal protocol has to give in to the desire, among those possessing tape recorders, photo cameras, and video cameras, to ‘record’ the event – an act most characteristic of our electronic age and of the possibilities of individually reproduced and consumed, virtual and vicarious experience it entails. The standardisation of a commodified artistic production is also borne out, by the emphasis (which is in absolute contradiction with historic village patterns) on identical bodily movements according to neat geometrical patterns, by the avoidance of ‘offensive’ bodily movements particularly in the body zones singled out by Christian prudery, and in the identical uniforms of the members of the main dancing troupes. Among the various, mainly village-derived troupes performing at Kazanga, the members of the one *urban* Kazanga troupe moreover advertise themselves through exceptional commodities such as shoes (that are not only expensive, but offensive and impractical in village dancing), expensive coiffures, sun glasses and identical T-shirts imprinted for the occasion. The commodification element is finally manifest in the separation – extremely unusual in this rural society – between

- passive, culture-consuming spectators, who explicitly are not supposed to join in the singing and dancing,
- the producers (who clearly act not by their own initiative – as in the village – but do as they have been told), and
- the supervising elite (who in their turn single themselves out through such commodities as formal jackets and ties).

9.5.3. Embodiment in the Kazanga festival

Even under the performative format, Kazanga has no choice but to present the Nkoya identity (recently constructed as it clearly is, and even reduced to virtuality in the commodified and invented context of the festival) as inscribed onto the very bodies of those who define themselves socially as the bearers of that identity, and who express it through their bodily manifestations in music, song and attire. The performance embodies the identity and renders it communicable in an appropriate format, communicable even to an outside world where, before the creation of Kazanga in its present form, the Nkoya identity did not mean anything of positive

value. The stress on uniformity of the performers and their actions paradoxically creates both

- an illusion of being identical – which dissimulates actual class differences, and makes each dance troupe represent the entire Nkoya nation as a whole, and
- a sense of distinction – for very visibly, the urban elite’s troupe is ‘more equal’ than the other performers, and than the spectators.¹

In this incorporative context one also borrows from a repertoire that has certainly not been commodified even though it is performative. Dressed in leopard skins, around the temples a royal ornament of Conus shells from the distant Indian Ocean, and brandishing an antique executioner’s axe (all these attributes – regalia, in fact – have now become non-commodities, pertaining to a royal circuit that in the present time no longer engages in long-distance trade as it did during the nineteenth century), Mwene Kahare Kabambi, an aged royal chief, with virtuoso accompaniment from a hereditary honorary drummer of the same age (he has always been far above performing with the state-subsidised royal orchestra in the routine court contexts), performs the old Royal Dance that since the end of the nineteenth century was rarely if at all seen any more in this region. At the climax the *king* (for that is what he shows himself to be at this point: he now seems no longer a ‘chief’ incorporated in the colonial or post-colonial state) kneels down and drinks directly from a hole² in the ground where beer has been poured for his royal ancestors – the patrons of at least his part of the Nkoya nation the Mashasha and, implied to receive the deeply emotional cheers from the audience. And young women who have long been through girls’ puberty initiation themselves,³ perform that ritual’s final dance, without any signs of the usual stage fright and modesty, and with their too mature breasts against all tradition not bare but tucked into conspicuous white bras. Yet despite this performative artificiality their sublime bodily movements, that in this case are far from prudish or censored, approach the village-based original format of their dance sufficiently closely to bring the spectators, men as well as women, to ecstatic expressions of a recognised and shared identity. Thus, in the midst of *sensus particularis* as derived from the performance of reified and commodified music and dance before strangers (non-locals, non-peasants, non-Nkoya), outbursts of *sensus communis* confirm and restore a sense of identify that one feared had been lost with

¹ Cf. Orwell 1949.

² In the nineteenth century the hole was still formed by a dug-in human occiput (top of a skull); nowadays a semi-spherical earthenware or enamel bowl is used instead. There are strong indications from oral tradition that the beer replaces the blood of slaves immolated over the hole. If so, the entire makeup is very similar to, and (in the light of more comprehensive evidence linking Nkoya kingship to Ancient Egyptian kingship; cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (a)) probably derives from, royal human sacrifice dating back, in Africa, to the earliest dynastic times of Ancient Egypt (Wilkinson 2001: 266f). Also see van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e), on the *imiut* shrine in Ancient Egypt.

³ Cf. above, chapter 3.

the advent of development, class and modern politics in the course of the last few decades.

Clearly, such concepts as ‘commodification’ and ‘transformative selection’ (from the traditional lived culture into today’s performative culture), however important, do not tell the whole story, and even after the recreation of Nkoya culture in the Kazanga format enough reason for enthusiasm and identification is left for us not to be too cynical about the levels of virtuality, unauthenticity and performativity that are attained in Kazanga, and in many comparable situations of globalising symbolic production in Africa today. Lost certainly is the taken-for-granted sense of authenticity of the celebrations of music and dance that only a few decades ago were incorporated into the rhythm of village life and in which all villagers freely joined as competent fellow-performers, instead of being reduced to passive and inhibited spectators. *Sensus communis* is now offset much more noticeably against a performative and ethnically divisive *sensus particularis*. But perhaps this contrast between then and now is partly an optical illusion; perhaps I was so enchanted, a few decades ago, by the collectivist overtones of village life (many anthropologists have been, throughout the history of that discipline) that I did not search closely enough, then, for manifestations of *sensus particularis*.

Nor are the peregrinations of *sensus communis* and *sensus particularis* fully predictable. They still escape a reductionist automatism, as my closing vignette may well indicate:

One moonlit night in the mid-1990s, I returned to the land of Nkoya after a few months’ absence. The last part of the journey had, as usual, to be completed on foot. The pale sandy paths across the forested savannah gleamed up under the full moon as if purposely illuminated, and – in a time-honoured Nkoya form of festive anticipation – we (the then chairman of the Kazanga Society, Revd Kambita, his cousin and my adoptive elder brother, Mr Dennis Shiyowe, and myself) allowed ourselves to follow these paths to where distant xylophone music attracted our attention. We finally found a score of ten-year-olds having a nocturnal party. As usually they passed the night without any parental supervision, and without any food or drink. But they frantically and expertly played their musical instruments, and danced ecstatically to the tune, not of time-honoured village songs, but of the purposely composed and orchestrated, politically and ethnically inspired songs that half a year earlier had blasted from the loudspeakers at the Kazanga festival – in other words they were dancing to the manifestations of commodification and *sensus particularis* introduced above. What we were witnessing that night was a form of reappropriation of a local product that had previously undergone the transformations of a global reformatting, and which, in the process, had shifted its emphasis from predominantly *sensus communis* to a mixture of the latter with *sensus particularis* and hence had lost all chances of retaining authenticity. And yet the Kazanga songs were regaining, in the eminently graceful and competent dancing, singing and xylophone playing acts of these children, a new authenticity as no truly ‘traditional’ unchanged item of local culture could ever aspire to. The children were negotiating

the tension between *sensus communis* and *sensus particularis* in their own effective way.

9.6. Envoi

The plurality of communities and identities as perceived and lived by individuals in society is the point of departure of intercultural philosophy. Is this plurality a mere surface illusion, under which the fundamental unity of humankind lurks as a truer reality? Or is, on the contrary, the thought of boundless community, in the face of the empirical fact of the incessant social construction of boundaries and distinctions, a mere escape from social reality into the ivory tower (or shall we say, towards the Königsberg) of philosophical abstraction? More likely, it is the development of tools to think and negotiate the field of tension between plurality and unity, between boundaries and their dissolution, that constitutes the true task of intercultural philosophy. This tension is analogous to the tension between philosophy and empirical social science. I have argued that greater insight in these central questions of the human condition may be gained if we let ourselves be guided both by Kant's theory of *sensus communis* and by such corrections and additions as present-day social sciences would suggest in this connection: stressing non-rational aspects of the person, the plurality of identities and groups and the shifting nature of identity – in short, offsetting *sensus communis* against its Manichaeic counterpart, *sensus particularis*. We stand to gain, not if we deny the tension, ignore the difference between a present-day social science perspective and Kant's philosophy, but admit their complementarity, and seek to position ourselves within the tension they generate between them.

As someone who, for most of his adult life, has combined the detached investigation of Nkoya society with my own committed participation in it as a member, I detect another analogy here: the tension between analytical distancing and participant engagement may be peculiar to the anthropologist's exceptional professional role, yet, at the same time, it is only another manifestation of the same field of tension. Acknowledging the tension amounts to an admission of the legitimacy of both the polar positions between which the tension is generated; that surely is a more promising strategy than seeking to resolve the tension by privileging one of the constituent poles by the application of rigid binary oppositions.

The Janus situation in local-level development organisation in Africa

Reflections on the intercontinental circulation of ignorance inspired by the situation in Kaoma district, western central Zambia

10.1. Introduction: Development and knowledge

In the course of the twentieth century, immense changes have taken place in the African countryside. Systems of production (agriculture, hunting, fishing, the collection of such forest products as honey, wax, wood, medicinal herbs), systems of circulation (trade, tribute, raiding, marriage), and the social organisational forms in which these systems were embedded (the kinship-based homestead, the localised clan, the chief's court, the specialist guild, the trading network), still viable by 1900 although under increasing attack from the slave trade, incipient labour migration, and the onset of colonial rule, have now largely broken down. They have given way to contemporary alternatives controlled by the intercontinental economic system, development agencies, non-governmental organisations, local elites, capitalist agricultural enterprise, and such remnants of the post-colonial state as may be capable of being incorporated into this radically altered rural environment. Natural resources (land, surface waters, game, fish, timber, medicinal plants), which in many parts of Africa were abundant at the turn of the nineteenth century, have been rendered scarce by population growth, by appropriation on the part of capitalist enterprises and local elites, and by sheer devastation as a result of misuse.

Meanwhile these natural resources have come under the attention of intercontinental agencies from a number of complementary developmental and income-generating perspectives: tourism as an extension of North Atlantic consumerism; environmental preservation as the extension of North Atlantic and, increasingly, global ecological concern; the identification, preservation and commercial exploitation, especially of unique local forms of biodiversity (for example medicinal plants). In development thinking of the late twentieth century, evolving views on agency, self-determination, identity, culture, empowerment and gender have led to increased insistence on the involvement of local personnel and organisational

resources in these contexts. It is now no longer foreign or urban experts, but local people who are to guard over Africa's ecological resources: game and forests. This ideologically motivated move has converged with the realisation that such local involvement might also be attractive in terms of efficiency and cost reduction.

What does one need to know about the local rural society in order to implement these ideas? What systematic risks are there for misjudging the local situation, so as to produce an organisational and ideological artefact that completely misfires in terms of the stated developmental objectives? How may one reduce these risks? These are the questions informing the present chapter.

I have no pretension of speaking for Africa as a whole. The points I will make are inspired by two strands in my research over the past thirty years: an intensive anthropological and historical study of the countryside of Kaoma district, western central Zambia; and reflection on the conditions and pitfalls of intercultural communication and knowledge production, especially in the encounter between African and European contexts. A description of relevant aspects of Kaoma district will help us focus on the more systematic and general message I seek to deliver.

10.2. Kaoma district, western central Zambia: Struggles over the natural environment.

Kaoma district is situated in western central Zambia, due west of the Zambezi/Kafue watershed. It is the size of a minor West European country, and its population has rapidly increased since the beginning of the twentieth century, when population density was well under 1/km². The well-watered savannah, characteristically wooded with the *Brachystechia* tree, has eminent agricultural opportunities lending to Kaoma district the proud identity of 'granary of western Zambia'; it also forms a very rich game and fishing environment.

Throughout the colonial period (1900-1964) modern agriculture concentrated in the western part of the district, while in the homesteads elsewhere in the district a complex historical agricultural system was combined with emphasis on fishing and especially hunting – the latter constituting the male identity model of the region's main ethnic group, the Nkoya. Before colonial rule and before pre-colonial state formation (from 1500 CE onwards), ecological resources were largely administered at the level of localised clans. Hunting was in the hands of a hunters' guild, initiation into which offered both technical and magical expertise. In the course of their ascent to power, kings and nobles increasingly appropriated the prerogatives of earlier clan leaders, by virtue of which kings could pose as having privileged rights on selected natural resources (leopard, elephant, eland, fishing ponds; moreover kings controlled the allocation of land). In order to realise these rights, the kings would employ hunters, organise collective fishing parties, exact tribute in kind and labour, and issue land to their subjects. In the early colonial period, the proclamation of the Kafue National Park, traversed by the Kafue River, caused kings and their people to shift their capitals and villages to the east and the west, and – in addition to game

legislation applicable outside the game reserve – reduced all hunting to poaching. Ideally, poaching was prevented by the state's game wardens. However, until well into the 1970s game meat (partly from big game straying from the Kafue National Park) continued to be a prominent component of the village diet; villagers would have a main source of cash income from the covert sale of bundles of dried meat throughout the region; and kings (designated 'chiefs' under colonial conditions, and deprived of much of their political, economic and judicial power) would continue to supplement their income considerably by the sale of ivory. Not only the chiefs' hunters, but most adult male villagers would have amazing hunting skills, and although nineteenth-century Portuguese muzzle-loaders were still in use, a modern rifle would be the standard proceeds from a villager's spell as a labour migrant at the distant mines and capitalist farms of Southern Africa. These guns also constituted major heirlooms, paraphernalia of royal and chiefly office, and hence bones of contention in succession and inheritance disputes. As major local means of production they were instruments of inequality, since the junior kinsmen and the hired hunters using these guns had to surrender most of their bag to the owner of the gun.

It was only in the course of the 1980s that big game disappeared from the region, which is attributable to a number of factors:

- the expansion of agricultural activities (especially the Nkeyema Agricultural Scheme¹ in the eastern part of the district initiated in the early 1970s)
- the slowly accumulating effect of historical, 'artisanal' forms of hunting, and
- the sudden increase of scale brought about by immigrant ethnic strangers (Luvale, Luchazi, and Chokwe, all hailing from Angola) using machine guns for hunting.

A similar increase of scale can be seen in the use of local timber resources: although large, commercial, capital timber exploitation has existed since colonial times in the adjacent Sesheke district south of Kaoma district, and although obviously the local forest was the main source of timber, bark rope, etc. for the villagers of Kaoma district, it was mainly from the late 1970s that the district's high-quality timber resources were exploited for regional and national markets by local entrepreneurs using power saws.

There is an important process of class formation to be appreciated here. Until the 1970s, Kaoma district had nothing to offer to ambitious young people with such (limited) formal education as the mission schools could provide – the only career opportunities were situated far away, temporarily as a labour migrant, and more permanently in urban formal sector employment. However, by the 1970s the first generation of Nkoya urbanites were in their forties, approaching normal retirement age by Zambian standards, and looking for opportunities to employ their urban skills

¹ Cf. Hailu 1995/2001; Nelson-Richards 1988.

of organisation, enterprise and politics, as well as their pension money, in their home area. The Nkeyema agricultural scheme was just what they were looking for, although from the beginning it was mainly accommodating ethnic strangers, besides the Nkoya post-urbanites.¹ The local idioms of kinship and kingship, patronage and clientship offered the returning would-be elites major opportunities for labour mobilisation and exploitation among their rural kinsmen. These politically sophisticated returning urbanites greatly insisted on the elaboration of Nkoya ethnic consciousness – exploiting the local feelings of resentment and inferiority, both vis-à-vis the central state and vis-à-vis the Lozi ethnic group. The latter had been politically, militarily, judicially and economically dominant in western Zambia (including the Nkoya region) since the mid-nineteenth century, and had begun to invade Kaoma district, after decades in which this dominance was merely enforced by individual Lozi chiefs and their staff, sporadically distributed over Kaoma district, from 1970 Lozi peasant farmers. Stressing the ethnic alienness of these Lozi peasant immigrants, the new post-urban Nkoya elite started to rally the local rural population under the banner of Nkoya-ness, bringing their ethnic followers to accept, and to publicly identify with (for example in the context of annual cultural festivals), the post-colonial state and its ruling party (then UNIP, i.e. the United National Independence Party). This strategy brought the post-urban elite considerable political resources from the centre – resources readily to be converted into economic privilege with regard to lucrative local natural resources: agricultural land, game, timber.

Brokerage between the local rural periphery, and the outside world, promised to be a rewarding source of income and power for post-urban local elites, in addition to urban formal-sector superannuation schemes and such urban assets (house rentals especially) as they had acquired prior to their rural retirement. In this brokerage, they used a number of intersecting organisational channels at the same time:

- political parties (at first the all-successful UNIP, later the MMD - the Movement for Multi-party Democracy – that was to supersede UNIP, and more recently also opposition parties rivalling MMD)
- bodies that were part of the local state presence: the rural council, ward development committees, and village development committees, through which agricultural loans are made available to deserving local farmers
- statal or parastatal agricultural schemes such as Nkeyema
- a non-governmental organisation sprung from local initiative: the Kazanga Cultural Association, staging annual ethnic festivals at which regional and national politicians are guests of honour who are wooed for their access to development resources (cf. chapter 9)

¹ By the term ‘post-urbanites’ I refer to a category of people, common in western central Zambia, who were born in a village setting, migrated to an urban environment and there successfully pursued a modern career, after which they retired in their rural area of origin (usually in their forties) in order to take up a position of authority, respect and political power, combining the resources of know-how, capital, and network contacts as accumulated while in town, with a new social and political constituency in their rural home area.

- the structure of traditional leadership: the chief – often a close kinsmen of the post-urban elites – with his senior court officials, royal council of nobles and council of village headmen
- national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the field of development, seeking to broker, in their turn, between the local scene and intercontinental donor agencies
- local branches of these intercontinental donor agencies acting without the intermediary of national NGOs
- national branches of internationally operating world religions, such as the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Evangelical Church
- foreign, North Atlantic researchers (anthropologists, entomologists) who lack the financial backing of donor organisations yet can offer skills, contacts and respectability.

For most of these organisations it is true that they were under external, especially intercontinentally articulated, constraints to justify the local activities of their personnel (often highly remunerated by any standards) in terms of access to the local population (in whose lives they are supposed to participate, dishing out development and empowerment), and whose cultural and ethnic identity they are supposed to further. Here closeness to the traditional rulers and control over the Kazanga Cultural Association enabled the post-urban elites to claim that they represent ‘the people’. This was especially emphasised in symbolic behaviour such as the organisation of the Kazanga annual festival, in the kindling of local anti-Lozi resentment (leading to violence directed at the district Lozi chief’s court, and some of its branches in the district, and in the organisation of a local movement¹ to prevent the expansion of ethnic strangers in the surroundings of the Nkeyema scheme, on ‘Nkoya ancestral land’).

Meanwhile the promise (and sometimes the fact) of these elites’ access to outside resources (via the other, more outer-directed organisational contexts in which they sought to insert themselves, as listed above) guaranteed them the villagers’ ostentatious public support. What the elite brokers were doing amounted to the active and creative restructuring of the contradictory, confusing, complex and highly eroded social field – once effectively arranged around time-honoured local forms of kinship and kingship – into the semblance of a transparent, formal, and ideologically acceptable structure whose apparently clear lines of organisation, authority and identity made it eligible for outside organisations (NGOs, development agencies) as an honourable, deserving context for their activities. With their considerable urban experience of global empowering idioms, the elites understood full well that the outside agencies were in need of qualified and mediated access – at least on paper – to the local population. For these outside agencies needed to deploy their activities in a form that was intercontinentally monitored and evaluated in terms of currently

¹ Initiated, and largely consisting of, the Mr Libupe whom we shall meet below.

fashionable development ideologies, in which ‘the people’, their culture and identity happened to play a major role. And, for the villagers eagerly desiring income, access to markets, infrastructural facilities and consumptive opportunities, the elites seemed to be their only chance: they largely control the access to the outside world.

Incidentally, the elites did not prove to be the local villagers’ only chance. Different opportunities opened up in the district in the early 1990s, when the eastern Nkoya chief Mwene Kahare issued farms (a section of the people’s communal land), each of the general Zambian standard size of 2500 ha, i.e. 25 km², to a dozen South African White, Afrikaans-speaking commercial farmers. After surveying, this land was registered as freehold land in the hands of these stranger entrepreneurs, who soon managed to establish apartheid-style rural labour relations in that chief’s area. The local peasants are prepared to turn themselves into underpaid farm hands, despite the obsolete and racist labour conditions offered. Small-scale subsistence and commercial farming is therefore grinding to a halt and entire villages resettle near the farms because they constitute the only local source of cash income. These short-term opportunities have persuaded the average villagers to accept the alienation of their communal land; protests, and accusations to the effect that the chief has actually sold the land to the immigrant Boers, are mainly heard from the post-urban elites who are themselves engaged in commercial farming. They realise, more than their kinsmen in the villages, that Nkoya/Lozi ethnic conflict in Zambia’s Western Province is increasingly going to be a conflict over arable land and cheap labour as major economic resources, so that the introduction of a third party, the stranger farmers, in the long run can only be to the detriment of the local peasants – and of these local elites themselves!

10.3. The Janus situation in developmental knowledge production

Development sociologists have repeatedly argued¹ that current global practices of so-called development co-operation depend on a system of interconnected, but compartmentalised, domains for the cultivation of performative² non-truths. The funding, legitimation, and continuity of local development projects, and the extent to which these may further or harm their North Atlantic experts’ careers, depend on the systematic control over the production and circulation of particular forms of knowledge (or rather, of ignorance), in a stepped system of impression management extending from the local grassroots level in the South, to the boardrooms in Washington, London, The Hague and Stockholm. Brokers, such as our Nkoya elites, constitute the interface between one level and the next; they collect, transform and redistribute knowledge at the two levels at whose intersection they find themselves,

¹ Cf. Quarles van Ufford 1993; Cohen 1993.

² I.e. deliberately, ostentatiously and strategically produced, in anticipation of the audience’s expectations.

seeking to create satisfaction at both levels at the same time – which can only be done by concealing the truth of one level from the other level – and exacting a financial and social fee on that basis.

Without such compartmentalised control of qualified ignorance, the various distinct levels of competence, decision-making and relative autonomy would fold together and collapse, and the development industry as we know it would cease to exist – unless it succeeds in finding (which would be greatly to that industry's credit and would radically enhance our hopes for a better world) a new, more effective and less manipulated structure for the intercultural circulation of knowledge. Given such compartmentalised control, however, development organisation at the grass-roots inevitably acquires a Janus face looking both ways.¹ Janus is the Ancient Roman god of thresholds; what the brokers do is to create a threshold or boundary, and hence to articulate (not to say, invent) the separateness of the two domains involved. They thrive by keeping domains apart, and by inserting themselves as the sole connecting force between the domains thus separated. The impression management at one level does not have its bluff called at the next level, and the system thrives on common interest between brokers and experts – even though its goals are formulated in terms of a third party whose advantage is now reduced to that of accidental and unpredictable sidekicks: namely, the villagers, the common people, the poor, etc.

An eloquent but slightly side-tracking illustration of this theory can be seen in Kaoma district's presence on the Internet. This medium's infrastructure in the district, and in many other places in Africa, is still so deficient as to preclude its functioning as an expression of local popular identity. Under such marginal conditions, whatever from the local scene manages to penetrate into a global medium such as the Internet can only do so thanks to non-local inputs of interests, means, and formal and stylistic conventions. Hence Kaoma's representation on the Internet is a misleading travesty of the actual local situation – not a form of valid knowledge but a form of ignorance. Thus we spot, on the Internet, *an NGO in the field of local fauna management*, directed – in conjunction with a North American scholar who is otherwise unknown to me – by my enterprising adoptive cousin Mr Reginald Libupe.²

Predictably the element of ethnic identity and traditional culture is strongly highlighted in this NGO's message. But we cannot read the Internet message for what it is worth unless we have access to the kind of information that normally does not circulate on the Internet and that is the fruit of intensive local participation for decades. Mr Libupe is the most conspicuous and successful post-urban broker among the Nkoya: retired managing director of Zambia Mountain Rangers³ (a major parastatal controlling, with its canned meat, much of the protein intake of Zambia's large lower-class urban population); a political adventurer in various political parties

¹ My discussion on this point somewhat coincides with that of Von Benda Beckmann *et al.* 1989: 210.

² A pseudonym.

³ Name and nature of this enterprise have been altered so as to protect the protagonist's identity.

in succession; sometime member of the Kaoma Rural Council; owner of a ramshackle bar-motel at Nkeyema; owner of a thriving farm at the same agricultural scheme; only a few years ago active as an exploiter of the lucrative hardwood reserves of the region wielding a power saw; initiator of the move, mentioned above, to protect 'Nkoya ancestral land' from encroachment by ethnic strangers; leading member of the Kazanga executive; cousin of Chief Kahare Kabambi and unsuccessful contender to the Kahare throne at the 1994 succession; and eminently lucrative entrepreneur who during several seasons in the 1990s managed to convert the local small farmers' hard-earned cash into nothing but the sheer *promises* of fertiliser to be delivered at the right moment in the local cultivation cycle – but which never materialised. The Internet allows us – albeit only on context-less attendance lists – a glimpse of Mr Libupe's participation in international, donor-sponsored conferences, even all the way to Dakar, where his fauna management NGO, since it claims to be carried *by the very people themselves*, turns out to be eligible for subsidy, qualifying, under that other magical category of the development parlance of the 1990s, as a 'rotating credit association'

The better one knows the district, the more one is surprised to learn that Mr Libupe has worked such wonders in the field of local fauna management in this region, where male ideal identity still hinges on hunting and the distribution of meat, where a high level of meat consumption is a time-honoured norm, and where the colonial and post-colonial state was always resented for defining as poaching a simple act of enacting historical individual and collective rights over the natural environment. In fact Mr Libupe's NGO is largely virtual: it mainly exists on paper and the Internet, although his kinsmen and clients are prepared to go through the motions of formal meetings and the actual performance of fauna management duties, especially when outside visitors come along to assess such performance. And such assessments tend to be positive: after all, Mr Libupe himself will be there to welcome the expert visitors, and his education, his winning executive style and his perfect command of English, acquired during several training missions to the North Atlantic region, inspire his foreign visitors with trust and relief – he is so much like themselves.

More such virtual, apparently formal, organisations may be spotted at the interface between Nkoya villagers and the outside world today. The Kazanga Cultural Association itself is a perfect example.

The Kazanga Cultural Association is a society registered under the *Zambian Societies Act*, and as such a non-governmental organisation of the type so much stressed in Africanist development literature of the 1990s. Its formal nature however is largely illusory. The Kazanga association has no paying members and no membership list. Its minimal financial resources derive from voluntary individual contributions, mainly donated by the members of the executive themselves, who in this way gain popularity and influence. On the other hand, an executive position accords one a petty source of income via expense accounts. The *Zambian Societies*

Act requires an Annual General Meeting, which in this case is held on the evening of the second day of the annual Kazanga festival. In the absence of a membership list and of fee paying, this is in practice a meeting not of members but merely of several dozens of interested persons. Executive elections mean that from these several dozens of interested persons co-opted for the occasion, groups of ten people are formed according to place of residence or of origin. Depending on which people happen to be present, such a group may comprise representatives from a few neighbouring villages, from an entire valley, from an official polling district as delineated by the Zambian state for the purpose of official national elections, from a particular town at the Line of Rail (i.e. the urban areas of central Zambia), or even from the entire Line of Rail. With greater or lesser privacy these groups cast their votes for the available candidates, the votes are counted, the result announced via the festival's intercom system, after which the departing executive leaves under scorn and shame, while the new executive is formally installed and treats the voters to a 200-litre drum of traditional beer. As basically a self-financing clique of successful urbanites and post-urbanites, the executive of the Kazanga Cultural Association has a strong class element, which I have already stressed elsewhere in my analysis of the Kazanga festival proper. All these details bring out the informality and virtuality of the Kazanga Cultural Association.

10.4. Discussion

Our example of misleading Internet representation reflects a wider problem in the production and circulation of valid knowledge about contemporary situations in the African continent: the existence of media (the Internet, NGOs, development projects) which, while pretending to deliver authentic and valid knowledge about Africa, only render onto the outside world, in the way of knowledge, whatever that outside world has invested in that medium and in Africa in the first place. The Internet is just as inadequate a receptacle for valid and representative knowledge on Kaoma district as is Mr Libupe a representative of the people of Kaoma district, their fauna management capabilities and organisational forms, and their rotating credit associations: whatever appears beneath these guises under Mr Libupe's leadership or supervision is predominantly extractive devices, raiding both the local peasants and the international development agencies for the sake of personal enrichment.

The compartmentalisation of intercontinental knowledge production; the eagerness to believe claims cast in terms of cultural and ethnic identity and people's participation; the great difficulty to establish direct links between the local population bypassing the elite brokers who, largely for personal interest, block up the free flow of valid knowledge from one organisational level to the next; the eagerness to impose on a local scene high-sounding ideals that reflect the latest fashion in developmental 'philosophy'; and the fact that it is largely against an intercontinental development agency's interest to generate reliable locally-based assessment procedures by which to gauge the realisation, in the South, of goals and

ideals formulated in the North – all these factors combine to empower the Mr Libupes of Africa in their attempts to conjure up structures of participation, management, and self-realisation which are largely fictitious and ineffective – in other words, virtual – and which on closer scrutiny turn out to be exploitative, to boot.

Brokers like Mr Libupe link two levels or domains:

- the villagers, on the one hand,
- the locally-operating representatives of national and intercontinental development organisations, on the other.

One of the techniques employed in this connection is to present to the international level the image of a recognisable formal organisation with which one can carry out legitimate and transparent business and yet is eminently acceptable in terms of popular grounding, cultural identity and tradition. To the villagers, the same organisation turns out to be, in practice, far more amorphous and to run along familiar lines of local social organisation: patronage between classes substantially different in power and wealth, ethnic and feudal loyalty readily exploited – in other words, an inevitable aspect of the class situation in which twentieth-century social change has landed these African villagers.

This does not rule out the awareness, among the villagers, of the fact that the local elites very much have their own agenda, are involved in primitive accumulation at the expense of both the state and the local villagers themselves, and in the process violate moral rules and kinship obligations, even if they pay lip-service to these norms in elegant use of the common minority language, Nkoya. Occasionally this awareness gives rise to open expressions of conflict between the villagers and the local elite, but far more often such contradictions are hushed up. After all, the elites are the villagers' main access to the outside world, which they, the villagers, cannot afford to risk no matter how great their sense of being exploited.

The Janus face of local-level organisations in contemporary development endeavours is perhaps the one striking structural feature that we need to keep in mind whenever mobilising 'the people', their 'culture', and their 'traditional organisational resources' for goals and missions that were defined, in the first place, by development policy makers in the North. As long as the Janus face remains intact, a project organised on such a double agenda is still allowed to be filed, up in the North, as successful in terms of whatever the current development ideology happens to be. Now, in order to keep the Janus face intact – in order to keep the local villagers from shouting that the chief's ragged trousers are all around his ankles¹ – a

¹ Here I refer, not only to the famous fairy tale of the king's new clothes, but also to a Nkoya song, very popular in the area in the 1970s, which describes how, when boarding a regional bus of the Kandire line, a village elder's trousers sank down to his ankles because his belt broke. As a sign of disrespect, specifically implying that only incompetence and ridicule would be their part when embarking on modernity, the song was greatly resented by Nkoya male elders.

measure of spin-off benefits is actually required to reach the local population. For even if the forms of their attachment to the post-urban broker are different to those being specified on paper and on the Internet, without minimum benefits even traditional ties of kinship and kingship would not ensure the villagers' support at the (relatively few) critical moments when the broker has to present, to a critical outside world, proof of the actual functioning of the chimerical local-level development organisation he has conjured up.

The situation in Kaoma district is no doubt unique, and I am sure that my readership can cite numerous examples of a very different, much more tangible and less manipulative installation of local organisational initiatives for the furthering of such initially North Atlantic or global development goals such as environmental conservation and protection of biodiversity through local-level fauna management.

A very special place may be claimed, in such initiatives, for local culture and tradition, not only with regard to the organisational forms and procedures, but also with regard to the cosmology informing people's perception of nature, game and vegetation. The common assumption is that such a cosmology has survived or may readily be revived, and that it not only influences people's actual dealings with nature *outside* the formal and subsidised context framed for development endeavours, but also within such a context. One of the main reasons for self-congratulation that development thinking had in the 1980s, was the discovery of 'culture' as a factor explaining the failure of development policies so far, and as hope for future success in this field. The Nkoya case however suggests that we should proceed very carefully here, and be aware of the many pitfalls of manipulation, ambiguity and performativity that await us – in short, be heedful of the Janus face. If traditional culture, ethnic identity, local ways of going about self-organisation, are stressed in Mr Libupe's largely virtual fauna management organisation, this is *not* because he and his clients cannot help themselves – not because they happen to be slavishly programmed by a traditional culture that inevitably must seep through into whatever they do or say. *It is because the play on tradition is recognised by them to have very high currency in their dealings with outside development experts under the currently fashionable development ideology.* The forms they mediate in the process are not genuinely historical forms, but merely the ephemeral and shifting results of dextrous bricolage, striking a balance between:

- (a) local structural realities (the facts of inequality yet solidarity based on kinship and kingship), and,
- (b) the outsiders' expectations which the local brokers perceive to be in terms of a combination of ostentatious, exoticising traditional content and of a rational, transparent formal-organisational format reminiscent of North Atlantic models.

At this level of abstract formulation I see no reason to consider the Nkoya case unique, nay I would say that it brings out a dominant structural feature of contemporary African social contexts – and one whose misreading may well be the

greatest pitfall of otherwise well-intended development endeavours initiated from the North. I was first personally alerted to the Janus format, not in Zambia, despite decades of intensive participant research there, but in Botswana, where professional organisations of diviners and traditional healers, posing as fully-fledged professional formal organisations, present a similar Janus face, one side looking to the state, the other side looking to their membership who thus are facilitated to continue practices of several centuries' standing within a new legal and bureaucratic environment that – certainly in Botswana – offers new ways of capital accumulation and exploitation.¹

I can anticipate three likely objections to the extreme cynicism implied in my view of development in the Nkoya context, and of developmental organisational formats throughout Africa today.

The first two are obvious, and summarise much of this book's critique of North Atlantic intercultural knowledge production: are not the Mr Libupes of Africa rather indistinguishable (except in somatic appearance) from their adoptive cousins, the Wim van Binsbergens, or from North Atlantic Africanist fieldworkers in general? And at the same time, are both types of self-imposed brokers (the local African ones and the North Atlantic ones) not inevitable and indispensable, because of the violence and distortion that is invariably a part of all representation of the other, of all hermeneutical interpretation of the other's life-world, acts and motivations?²

And, as concerns the third objection: surely, the reader would say, 'traditional culture' cannot be denied to play a role in contemporary African life? After all, the Nkoya chiefs are there in their palaces (more like four-roomed thatched houses without electricity, telephone, running water or toilet – *virtual* palaces, in other words); and do not development experts spend days and days visiting these chiefs and humiliating themselves in an attempt to emulate court etiquette. Also, the royal council is there – and the development experts, having learned to respect local culture and to be afraid of going against the will of the local elders, insist on discussing things through with the royal council before implementing any initiatives. Undeniably, some court cases are still taken to the chief's capital for adjudication (most are not, though); land is still being issued by the chiefs, even if the latter may be more generous in this respect to affluent ethnic strangers capable of lucrative reciprocation than to their own people; music, dance and possession ritual is still being performed in the villages – and what is more invigorating in an expert's life after a tiring day 'with the local counterparts in the field' than to sit back and watch an authentic performance (note the contradiction) of traditional culture? And the annual Kazanga festival brings out the total repertoire of Nkoya expressive culture with what appears as only minor sacrifices to orchestration and stage direction, and electrical sound amplification – and also there the experts have a good time.

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1993b. Ironically, my findings on this point (largely based on research in the Botswana Registrar of Societies files) were made in 1990, a few weeks before I was myself unexpectedly to join such an organisation of traditional healers as a member; cf. chapters 5 and 6.

² Cf. Gadamer 1965; Mudimbe 1988, 1992c, 1994.

What to respond to such an evocation of the average expatriate's experience concerning what appears as the survival of authentic African culture in Africa?

I would say this. Kaoma district is representative of the many areas in Africa where the inroads of global economic and political relations, and of global culture, have invaded and virtualised the local scene, yet where so much is left of the traces of older historical local forms that the illusion may be entertained that these forms have braved the decades without undergoing major erosion, without major and decisive transformations. But they have, in fact, undergone such erosion and transformation. The development experts routinely visiting the chief's court, cramp their leg muscles emulating Nkoya royal etiquette, according to which all courtiers and visitors squat or kneel around the chief, flexing their bodies and keeping their legs folded under their buttocks for interminable hours right through until sunset. The development experts blister their hands in endless hand-clapping as part of the same court etiquette. And in doing so they pay homage, not so much to the splendours of ancient kings (for the chiefs, these kings' descendants – at least in Kaoma district¹ – are now powerless puppets of the state and of the Kazanga association), *but to the principles on which the construction of local organisations such as Mr Libupe's depend: to the essentialising, ethnicising, authenticity-expecting ideological sets imposed upon the local situation by the Northern development industry. And the brokers, safely in their NGOs that guarantee them semi-North Atlantic incomes and benefit, are good enough to oblige.*

10.5. Recommendations by way of conclusion

Once more we could ask ourselves what is the difference between such brokers, and anthropologists doing fieldwork. Meanwhile, to the development workers who, with the best of intentions and on the basis of an enormous and enviable knowledge of ecological systems, seek to find an enduring, equitable and if possible profitable basis for ecosystems' local management in the South, I would propose the following advice – if I have not already totally alienated these experts with my argument so far:

- Do realise that access to local rural populations is the major problem of your organisation;
- realise that local brokers have already volunteered to construct the interface between your organisation and the local rural population, and that they do so by virtue of a dextrous Janus technique, in which a sophisticated awareness of your own ideological and organisational constraints and goals is utilised by these brokers as their main strategic resource;

¹ Cf. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & van Dijk 1999 for convincing examples of the revival of chieftainship throughout the African continent today; the Nkoya situation (as described in my contribution to that volume; van Binsbergen 1999b, cf. 2003b) constitutes an exception.

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- to the extent to which tradition, culture, identity and authenticity are explicitly built into the blueprint of your plans, realise that to that extent the brokers on which you rely will be tempted to produce for you tradition, culture, identity and authenticity!
- realise that both the brokers, and the people they vicariously represent (often without being asked or empowered to do so), are not passive slaves of tradition and ethnic identity, no more than you are yourself; therefore, any attempt to tap or re-create authenticity is bound to produce deceptive and potentially exploitative artefacts, the opposite of the empowerment you seek to help bring about;
- realise that not so much tradition and its time-honoured organisational forms, but the dazzling interplay of modern contexts of (usually defectively functioning) formal organisations in the political, educational, medical, professional, and religious field, is the standard bedding for much of contemporary life in the South; help people to create the transparency, relative autonomy and accountability that come with formal self-organisation); the realisation of these lofty goals is largely impeded by recently acerbated class relations: locally, the inequality between elites and peasants, and, globally, the inequality between us in the North Atlantic region and inhabitants of the South;
- realise that the best way to break through the manipulations and mystifications of the Janus situation is by having your own, reliable, extensive, more or less independent direct access to local knowledge;
- finally, realise that the violence and distortion of representation and interpretation may be somewhat reduced if you understand and neutralise the Janus situation of local African cultural brokers; however, they can never be reduced to zero, because violence and distortion would also inevitably adhere to your own attempts at interpreting local culture within a North–South research undertaking or development project; in seeking access to local knowledge, other outsiders with a prolonged local presence (such as anthropologists, missionaries) may be of help to you, but beware lest they themselves are caught up in a Janus problematic of their own – and realise that they, too, are inevitably subjected to the violence of representation.

Such access as stipulated in the penultimate point needs highly specialised skills of information collecting, processing and synthesising; it needs local language skills; and most of all it needs time. It suggests that fully-fledged anthropological techniques are yet indispensable for the very realisation of the ambitious and eminently praiseworthy goals that Northern development thinking is increasingly setting itself. Since the late 1980s, the Rapid Rural Appraisal and similar devices have become popular as techniques, not because they solve the problems of knowledge production and local-level organisation under Janus conditions, but because they reinforce – since they entail superficial and hasty exposure to local conditions– the restrictions on the flow of information; it is these restrictions that

breed the ignorance on which perpetuation of the Janus situation depends. Evaluation procedures at strategic points in a development project's time path tend to use similar techniques. Without realising their built-in, Janus-like problematical nature, development workers practical efforts at the grassroots may be utterly wasted.

Reconciliation

Ideas and procedures constituting the African social technology of shared and recognised humanity

11.1. Introduction

‘Reconciliation (theology) means in general: the lifting of enmity and the restoration of peace. Usually this effect cannot be brought about fully by compensation of the evil perpetrated; in addition is required forgiving of guilt and foregoing retaliation. In Christian ethics the genuine (readiness to) reconciliation with enemies has always been regarded as a sign of love and humaneness (for example Mt. 5: 43f). The opposite applies when the reconciliation, or the readiness to reconciliation, is insincere. That is the case if reconciliation is desired for other reasons than the restoration of right and love, if contradictions are merely covered up and if aggressive feelings are not genuinely resolved and integrated.’¹

The above quotation offers a fair summary of the Judeo-Christian conception of reconciliation. Van Kessel, the Dutch theologian who wrote this as part of an encyclopaedia entry, shows considerable insight into the dynamics of conflict. In his article he stresses that reconciliation should not come too late or too early: for conflict has not only negative, but also positive, effects on people and groups, and we should guard against less noble motives for reconciliation, such as cowardice. In many religions, and especially in Judaism, the author goes on, reconciliation as a concept addresses relationships not only between people but also between humans and the supernatural: the Day of Atonement, which, among other things, involves

¹ The original text:

‘Verzoening (theologie) betekent in het algemeen: opheffing van vijandschap en herstel van vrede. Doorgaans kan dit niet volledig bereikt worden door compensatie van aangedaan kwaad, maar is daarvoor ook vergeving van schuld en afzien van vergelding noodzakelijk. In de christelijke ethiek is waarachtige (bereidheid tot) verzoening met vijanden steeds gezien als kenmerk van liefde en humaniteit (o.a. Matt. 5: 43vv.) Het tegendeel geldt, als verzoening(sbereidheid) onwaarachtig is. Dat is het geval, als verzoening om andere redenen dan rechtsherstel en liefde wordt gewild, als tegenstellingen alleen maar worden toegedeekt en agressieve gevoelens niet werkelijk worden opgelost en geïntegreerd.’ (van Kessel 1975; my translation).

dismissing the scapegoat into the desert.¹ There reconciliation is primarily with God and presupposes an awareness of God's forgiveness, and moreover repentance, conversion, and a change of behaviour. Christianity, van Kessel continues, builds on these basic ideas, defining the decisive reconciliation between God and men as the redemption brought by Christ.

Thus from the Jewish-Christian orientation of North Atlantic culture, a specific, and historically important interpretation has been given to the concept of reconciliation. Yet reconciliation is very far from primarily or exclusively a Christian concept. The society of Israel in the late second and in the first millennium BCE reflected in its social organisation, in many respects, the societies of other Semitic-speaking peoples and of the Ancient Near East in general. The patterns of conflict settlement that have been sanctified in the Jewish-Christian tradition have more or less secular parallels in the Near East and North Africa.² I would go even further and claim that reconciliation is an essential aspect of all human relationships, both in primary human relations based on face-to-face interaction, and in group relationships of a political, religious and ethnic nature that encompass a large number of people. As in the Christian theological conception of reconciliation, in the religion of many societies the theme of interpersonal reconciliation is complemented by that of the reconciliation between man and god by mean of ritual, prayer and sacrifice.

In this chapter I intend to present a preliminary reflection on reconciliation. For this purpose, the data have to be gleaned from various sections of cultural anthropology. I have primarily derived my inspiration from my own researches over the years, in various parts of Africa south of the Sahara and in North Africa, on group processes in small-scale social contexts, and on the role of ritual, therapy and litigation in those contexts.

The self-evident attention of social scientists, especially of anthropologists, for processes of social accommodation, conflict regulation, reconciliation, in small-scale social contexts means that many of us have been researching reconciliation, along with the related topics, from a comparative angle without deeming it necessary to establish a formal anthropology of reconciliation. Some forty years ago such pioneers as Max Gluckman and Louis Coser³ had to realise that the obsession with regulation, integration, consensus and institutionalisation, under the then dominant paradigm of structural functionalism, had prevented the social sciences from developing a sub-discipline which could do justice to everyday experience: the study of social conflict. The preoccupation with processes of reconciliation as an implicit anthropological field of study has become possible by a fundamental shift that occurred in anthropology in the middle of the twentieth century, especially on the initiative of Max Gluckman. Because of that shift, the study of institutions ('society as a fixed scenario that is faithfully acted out by the actors, who in themselves are

¹ Lev. 16: 1f.

² Gellner 1963, 1969; van Binsbergen 1980a, 1980b, 1985b, and forthcoming (c).

³ Gluckman 1954, 1955, 1963, 1965; Coser 1956, 1961.

mutually replaceable³) gave way to the *extended case method*: society as the largely contingent resultant of the historicity of micro-political process.¹ Meanwhile extended case research has developed into a very subtle and widely used anthropological tool. Following the increasing presence of violence in small-scale and large-scale social and political situations anywhere in the world, including North Atlantic society, we have seen, during the last one and a half decades, the emergence of a social science of violence.² It is time for an anthropology of reconciliation.³ This not only reflects the increasing violence inflicted by national states, ethnic groups, citizens, men and women, elders and youth, upon themselves and each other; but also the context of massive socio-political movements as conceived in broader and more forward-looking terms than just violence alone: the formation of the European Union half a century after the most comprehensive and most disruptive war that Europe and the world have ever known; the incorporation, in Europe again, of the massive influx – again unprecedented in history – of intercontinental immigrants with their own somatic, cultural and religious specificities; the contemporary experience of being constantly invaded by information concerning large-scale violent conflict elsewhere in the world; and, most recently, the increased hostility between the USA-dominated North Atlantic region, and the world of Islam, creating scenes of violence and suffering in Palestine/Israel, Somalia, the USA, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Given my specific expertise I opt to choose as the perspective of my argument not the macro-reconciliation of large social groups in the context of civil war, ethnic war and genocide, which Africa has seen so abundantly in the course of the last few decades of the twentieth century; instead I shall explore the micro processes that take place at the level of the village society, or of a group of neighbours within an urban quarter.

¹ Van Velsen 1969, 1971; Turner 1968a.

² From among Africanist studies of violence I mention: Abbink 1995; Abbink *et al.* 1996; Beinart & Ranger 1992; Buijtenhuijs 1994; de Lame 1996; Devisch 1995a; Ellis 1995, 1999, 2000; Fisiy & Geschiere 1996; Geschiere & Fisiy 1994; Lan 1985; Le Roy & von Trotha 1992; Lemarchand, 1994; Longmann 1995; Malkki 1995; Mbembe 1988; Minnaar *et al.* 1992; Reynolds 1990; Richards 1996; Simonse 1992; van Beek 1988; van Binsbergen 1996d; Werbner 1991. To these may be added as general social science and philosophical reflections: Aya 1990; Bax 1995; Boehm 1984; Campbell & Gibbs 1986; Feldman 1991; Hamerton-Kelly 1987; Kapferer 1988; Krohn-Hansen 1994; Marsh & Campbell 1982; Riches 1986; Ross 1986; Scheffler 1991; Zulaika 1989.

³ In the context of the present book, which seeks to formulate anthropologically-based *prolegomena* towards a philosophy of interculturality, such an anthropology of reconciliation amounts also to a philosophy of reconciliation; cf. Bernasconi 1986. Indications for a theology of reconciliation in the African contexts may be gleaned from: Hasenhüttl 1991.

11.2. An attempt to define reconciliation

11.2.1. Explorations

In the first place it should be clear that a necessary condition for reconciliation is the following: explicit recognition by the parties concerned, that there is an specific, explicitly expressed conflict. This is less self-evident than it appears. Many conflicts and oppositions in society are partially implicit and partially concealed from the actors' consciousness. Many overt conflicts do not in fact revolve around the stakes that are apparently being mediated, but on underlying stakes that remain partially unexpressed and that are unclear to at least part of the combating actors. Reconciliation is only possible if the conflict is clearly and publicly discussed by those involved, and such discussion creates a clarity that may well have a beneficial influence on future relations, also because previously unexpressed contradictions have found an overt expression that allows them to be taken into account in the social process much more readily.

Moreover, reconciliation is a creative social act of rearrangement and reinterpretation. This must be understood in the following sense: if available legal rules would have been self-evidently and simply applicable to the case, the conflict would not have arisen and there would have been no question of reconciliation. Probably reconciliation always resides in the recognition that firm rules are not sufficient. Dropping those rules is an acknowledgement of shared humanity and therefore creates the central condition for community, for society. This means that reconciliation is perpendicular to the normative, the institutionalised: it provides the additional cohesion that makes community and society possible. In this way reconciliation constitutes society. Hence also the fact that a confession of guilt needs certainly not always be a condition for reconciliation, or a necessary part of reconciliation.

Reconciliation therefore is not so much the alternative to conflict, but the transformation of conflict, and one that makes it possible both to define clearly the stakes of the conflict and to adopt a relative view of these stakes in the light of a larger good, pointing towards the future and towards a wider community than just the parties involved in the conflict.

Reconciliation is emphatically not the application of formal normative rules from a society's cultural orientation; it is not the result of a fixed procedure or a fixed scenario, but it consists in the creation of a framework within which those rules can acquire an added value of inclusivity, flexibility, transcendence.

In this process it becomes manifest what people feel to be the most fundamental basis of their social life. This can be many different things, for instance:

- the recognition of a shared humanity; then reconciliation implicitly implies that a particular conception of the human person is being mediated
- the recognition of the need to terminate the conflict in the interest of future generations

- recognition of a shared identity
- recognition of shared responsibility vis-à-vis the supernatural.

These themes do not in the least rule out an element of self-interest in bringing about, and accepting, reconciliation. Probably, on this point, the anthropological discourse on reconciliation takes a distance from the theological discourse, which centres on integrity and authenticity and considers self-interest in reconciliation disqualifying.

The shared humanity that is restored, and expressed, in reconciliation, also makes possible a return to other forms of contact, which in their turn foreshadow future possibilities of reconciliation. If the reproduction of society, to a considerable extent, takes place by means of reconciliation between groups, then it stands to reason that other reproductive elements may serve as an expression of such reconciliation as is being reached. Much reconciliation is accompanied by the consumption of food and drink, which often may be interpreted locally in terms of a sacrifice to supernatural beings overseeing the reconciliation process, but which may also be simply recognised as the conditions for the maintenance and the reproduction of the human body. Collective consumption in this manner is an expression of the same shared humanity that is being implied in reconciliation. On both sides of the Mediterranean massive annual saints' festivals display such commensality to a great extent. In practice they constitute a calendrical event of reconciliation in the midst of a year full of violence or the threat of violence between various villages, clans, etc.; during the annual festival the members of these rival social units have sanctuary to visit each other's respective festivals and saintly shrines as pilgrims, i.e. in an explicitly ritual context. Also here we see an element of biological reproduction as an extension of the shared humanity as emphasised in reconciliation. For such annual festivals are, among other things, informal marriage markets. And in general, in a large number of contexts the world over, reconciliation is symbolised by engaging in marital relations. As the Mae Enga¹ of New Guinea put it (a society of the segmentary type such as we shall discuss below):

‘We marry the people we fight’.

Also, a specifically sexual expression of reconciliation is possible, as is borne out, for example, in the numerous accounts and myths featuring marriages between the victors and the vanquished.

Moreover, reconciliation often involves the explicit verbalisation of the termination of a conflict. Such verbalisation is often public, and often depends on the intercession of a third party in the role of mediator. Reconciliation may be a public event, and important forms of social control derive from the public confession of a state of reconciliation.

¹ Meggitt 1965, 1977.

However frequent though, neither the public nature of reconciliation nor the intercession of mediators is a universal feature of reconciliation.

11.2.2. Not always mediators

An oath, such as accompanies many contexts of reconciliation in North Africa, may invoke invisible supernatural agents in such a way that formally no specific intercession of mediating humans is required anymore. Here the collective oath is a central mechanism of reconciliation. Taking an oath by reference to a supernatural power (God, or a saint – typically one whose grave is in the vicinity) invokes a super-human sanction in case the sworn statement that is capable of terminating the conflict, turns out to be false or, if it is a promise, not to be honoured. Although the supernatural being and the latter's sanction are at the centre of reconciliatory oath-taking, such oaths are often taken before outsiders invested with religious powers: living marabouts, who are no party to the conflict and who – through their abstention from weapons and violence – have situated themselves outside the dynamics of secular social life. By contrast, ordinary life in that part of the world has tended to consist of a continuous struggle over ecologically scarce goods (land, water, cattle, trading routes), and over persons (women, children, subjects, slaves). Incidentally, the institution of these peaceful marabouts, who through their association with saints' graves that are fixed in the landscape have a special link with the land, is closely related, both systematically and – probably – historically, to the institutions of earth priests and oracular priests of West Africa, to the leopard-skin chiefs of East Africa, to the oracular priests and heralds of Ancient Greece, Italy and the Germanic cultures;¹ the themes of the herald's staff and of the Hermes-like mediator are widespread throughout the Old World.²

11.2.3. Not always public

However, different types of borderline situations can be conceived as far as the public and mediating aspects of reconciliation are concerned. The conflict may occur in such an intimate sphere that the admission of outside mediators involves great embarrassment if not shame – this often applies to the conflicts between kinsmen, which one tends to see through within one's own circle as long as this is still possible. In rural Zambia it is considered indecent to summon a close kinsmen to court – and this of course applies in many societies, including the North Atlantic one. Much reconciling and therapeutic ritual is in fact private.

There are several types of reconciliation. There is the reconciliation that although publicly confessed allows the conflict to simmer on, and, as a result, at least one of the parties involved continues to seek a genuine termination of conflict through the

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

² Kristensen 1966; Eitrem 1966; Brown 1947; Boylan 1922; Fauth 1979; Schouten n.d.: 99f; de Waele 1927; Hoffmann 1890; Meyer 1928-1936: II 97f; Boetzkes 1913; Breuil 1938.

effective annihilation of the adversary. Then again there is the reconciliation that does constitute a total transformation of social relations in a way which may closely approach the Christian theological definition of reconciliation. The latter type of reconciliation cannot merely be described in terms of law and power politics. It involves nothing less than man's fundamental capability of creating a society out of symbols, and of dynamically guarding and adapting these symbols. The shared humanity that underlies any successful reconciliation does not only resolve the specific conflict that was at hand, but also inspires the people involved to embrace the social in many or perhaps all other contexts in which they may find themselves. It produces a purification (catharsis). However, the extent and the duration of such catharsis depend largely on the dynamics of social structure obtaining in that time and place.

In reconciliation, not only society in general is formed or reinforced, but particularly the component conflicting groups constitute themselves in the process. We should not think of social groups as firm persistent givens that may or may not happen to be engaged in a particular conflict. Many groups have no previous existence before they form themselves in the very context of conflict, through the institutions of mobilisation of group members, through identification with the stakes of the conflict, and through the roles that are defined by these processes both during the conflict and in the reconciliation process. Part of reconciliation is that the conflict is explicitly verbalised; it is then that the conflicting groups need to have a name, a label, an identity. Even in Central African villages the following situation obtains: any individual has a considerable number of possible group memberships at the same time (of a number of villages, a number of clans), and it is only in concrete situations of conflict and reconciliation, when the social process intensifies, that one commits oneself, temporarily, to one specific group membership, allowing this to define who one is, which side one is on, and what one hopes to get out of the conflict; in a future conflict, however, that individual may turn out to belong to a different group.

11.2.4. The role of the mediating outsider¹

In order for someone to be able to play the role of mediator, special characteristics may be needed. Usually the mediators are not themselves party to the conflict. If they are party in one respect, it is likely that in another respect they are between both parties – for instance, as political leader of a group comprising both conflicting parties, or as kinsman of one party but affine (kinsman through marriage) of the other party. We shall come back to this point. High status brings to the mediator authority and also protection. And protection he may well need, for as long as the conflict has not terminated intercession may not be without risk, certainly not if the conflict in question involves physical violence. Also, a religious status (as prophet,

¹ The stranger as peace maker is also a major theme in Levinas; cf. Levinas 1993; Duyndam & Poorthuis 2003; Keifert 1991; Ogletree 1985; Raffoul 1998.

saint, scriptural specialist, priest), may confer authority and protection: the marabout, the griot (West African bard), the priest, the herald, who implicitly or explicitly are under the protection of supernatural forces and thence in a position to effect reconciliation in the lives of others. In addition, class differences may be expressed in the role of mediator: in many societies a high social position means, in the first place, the responsibility, the duty, and also the right, to bring about reconciliation between others; hence the politician or the boss is often the chairman and initiator of informal palavers, and so is the African village headman.

11.2.5. The social costs and benefits of reconciliation

The great benefit of reconciliation consists in the fact that society is newly constituted, not only on the concrete basis of the regained unity of parties which before were at daggers drawn, but also on a much more general and abstract level: the reconstitution of any social community in terms of shared humanity. The confession of such shared humanity is the essence of reconciliation. It creates the conditions in which to arrange the concrete practical issues of the conflict, once terminated, on a basis of trust. But against this social benefit, what is the price of reconciliation? To resign from a conflict that one has once started, may not be totally advantageous. The formal normative structure of the local society may stress peacefulness or prowess, and depending on that context the termination of conflict may be either honourable or shameful, a sign of strength or of weakness. To the extent to which conflict, and the reconciliation that may follow it, have a public nature outside the narrow circle of the parties immediately involved, to that extent any reconciliation will have a social price, positive or negative, or a mixture of both in a plurality of aspects. But reconciliation will also have a price in the case of a conflict that is not public but that is fought out in the inner rooms of a kin group, or other face-to-face relationships. On the one hand, both parties are being glorified by the ritual, abstract, sharing of humanity that is being testified in reconciliation. But, on the other hand, the manifest readiness to accept reconciliation may undermine the credibility of either party in each other's eyes and in the eyes of outsiders; this will particularly be the case in a context where confrontation and conflict are the everyday norm – such as in a segmentary society, or in the world of organised crime, in the context of economic competition in general, or in a bad marriage. Below we shall meet another possible price of reconciliation: a pent-up sense of powerlessness, in a situation where the socially weaker party, in the interest of socially testified harmony, is left no choice but to resign in a public reconciliation, even though the underlying problem is still experienced as very far from being resolved.

11.2.6. The symbolic technology of reconciliation

We have seen that it is not enough, in order to reach reconciliation, to bring to the fore the overtly available cultural contents of the situation, such as are manifest and self-evident to all actors involved. The very existence of the conflict points in the direction of a contradiction in the social process: positions exist side by side that are

each admissible in terms of the prevailing culture and of the system of social control, yet these positions are mutually irreconcilable. For the party occupying a particular position, that position is eminently valid; but to the other party, the opposite position is just as valid. Clearly social systems do not work in the same way as the axiomatic systems of symbolic logic and mathematics: it is common for social systems (as it is for biological systems) to arrive at more or less the same point from different starting points, along different routes, and to invest that point with the conflicting tendencies specific to the various points of departure. Contradiction is an inevitable and necessary condition of social life; and utopias in which such contradictions have been reduced to a minimum, or have been annihilated altogether, will be unliveable states of terror. Given such contradictions, it is not enough to summon to the fore what is already understood to be self-evident in the local society; instead, one has to appeal, relatively and selectively, to implicit possibilities that lie hidden in the culture and society. If one does not immediately succeed in making an effective (i.e. conflict terminating, actually reconciling) selection from this shared pool of cultural material, then the mediator in the course of his attempts at reconciliation, has to reformulate and transform publicly both the conflict and the underlying social and cultural material in such a way that it yet becomes possible, in the end, to come closer to one another and to confess publicly to this rapprochement.

Here we hit on one of the paradoxes of reconciliation. Although reconciliation (at any rate, in the African societies that have inspired my argument) is perpendicular to institutionalised frameworks and procedures in society, yet reconciliation is unthinkable without all parties concerned recognising a shared basis of communality, something on which they agree. This basis need not be a totally explicit given from the very beginning of conflict and reconciliation onwards. It is ritual that enables us to produce, in preparation of reconciliation, points of view and bases for communality which so far had not been perceived consciously by the parties involved in the conflict. It is the task of the outsider who monitors and presides over the process of reconciliation to identify, visualise, and exploit for the ultimate good, such hitherto unsuspected, hidden potential bases for communality. Especially African healers/diviners, whose task it is to bring out interpersonal conflicts and guide them towards reconciliation, tend to be masters in what we could call praxeological bricolage. By means of ‘do-it-yourself’ (French: *bricolage*) they construct a temporary, improvised language of communality, that was not felt to exist before the session started but that is the result of the verbal and non-verbal exchanges during the session, under the guidance of the therapist. And the latter is capable of bringing this about by means of the free use and the reinterpretation of selected symbolic material that, strictly speaking, is available within the local cultural orientation but not exactly in that specific form and combination in which it is summoned up in the divinatory and therapeutic session.

11.2.7. Reconciliation and time

The time dimension of reconciliation appears to be of great importance.

Reconciliation has the character of a process but also of a moment. The ritual of reconciliation is of a condensed nature, both in space and in time. If the conflict involves large sets of people (for example ethnic groups, nations, creeds), typically only a selection of the members of the groups involved participate directly in the reconciliation process. Reconciliation makes it possible to arrive at a specific transformation of the conflictive matter, which may subsequently lead, in a much more diffuse way, to the reorientation of the everyday life of all group members concerned. Reconciliation, therefore, does not only mean the transformation of conflictive matter, but also means indicating the possibilities for the transfer of conflict-terminating factors from reconciliatory ritual to everyday life. It means, in fact, a transformation of the ongoing social process.

But not only need we make a distinction between reconciliation as a process (the terminal phase of a conflict that has already run a considerable course through time), and reconciliation as the concrete moment when the viewpoints informing the conflict are particularly clearly expressed, when the parties in conflict concretely constitute themselves, and when these parties do, in fact, arrive at reconciliation by reference to a creatively transformed representation of the conflict matter. It is more important to realise that reconciliation is in itself a thinking about time: the normal time, when conflict is taken for granted, is interrupted, and it makes way for an ideal time, one of reconstruction, purity, clarity, sociability, in which the conflict is no longer capable of occurring; and that moment looks forward to the future, in which the transformation implied by reconciliation, will – ideally – have caused the then normal time to have permanently shifted a bit towards ideal time. Even when reconciliation does not last and new conflict will continue to present itself in future, yet this reordering of time is the central idea of such transformation as is implied in reconciliation. In reconciliation eternity simmers through in a way which – even without Christian inspiration – occurs in African, Asian, Latin American and Oceanic societies just as well as it does in North Atlantic ones, under the inspiration of the Christian theory of reconciliation; yet that theology may be recognised as an impressive, classic expression of what is now gradually emerging as an anthropology of reconciliation.

Another temporal dimension of reconciliation has to do with its possibly cyclic nature. In many African societies reconciliatory events are not so much unique, once for all, but repetitive and circular. This is what Calmettes¹ points out in the context of the cyclical nature of witchcraft eradication movements in the villages of Northern Zambia in the twentieth century: these invariably occurred in a cycle of crises, a new crisis occurring once every ten to fifteen years. In my view, this cycle was produced by a combination of ecological and demographic factors periodically causing unbearable strain on the local community's natural and leadership resources. Reconciliation, then, is one of the predictable phases in the social process of the

¹ Calmettes 1972.

small-scale local community, in a continuous pendulum-swing movement back and forth between the following positions:

- integration after, and through, reconciliation
- erosion of the communality thus produced;
- initial skirmishes;
- conflict

after which the cycle is repeated unless reconciliation proves impossible and the community (village, kin group, congregation, political party) falls apart.

In segmentary, acephalous societies (see below) this repetitive nature of conflict and its resolution is not even distributed over an extension of time, but occurs at one and the same moment of time. There, reconciliation and conflict coincide incessantly, in line with the constantly shifting, kaleidoscopic, segmentary perspective within which an actor in such a society has situated himself vis-à-vis other actors.

In those African societies that have an elaborate political system organised around a chief or king, the cyclic nature of reconciliation goes through a developmental process along with the person of the king himself. As long as the king is alive and well, a condition prevails according to which the political system, the human society in general, the land, the crops, game, the rain, the cosmos in its totality, know the greatest regularity and fertility. However, at the king's death – even when it is only imminent – an interregnum begins during which both the political, the social and the cosmic order is supposed to be fundamentally disturbed, so that illness and drought, infertility, conflict, violence, incest and sorcery may reign supreme. This state can only be terminated by the accession of a successor, who brings about the reconciliation, both politically, socially and cosmically, through which chaos is turned once more into order.

Conflict, revenge, feud, sorcery are the opposites of reconciliation, and it is to these alternatives that I shall return towards the end of my argument.

11.3. Reconciliation and socio-political organisation: Segmentarity and feud

11.3.1. Segmentarity and the Nuer

One of the principal contexts in which the topic of reconciliation has come to the fore in anthropology is that of the feud and of the structure of acephalous societies – those of which feud is a characteristic per excellence. Evans-Pritchard – in his description of the East African Nuer, an acephalous society – defines the feud as follows:

‘lengthy mutual hostility between local communities within a tribe’.¹

In Evans-Pritchard’s analysis, the entire (or rather, the entire male) social structure presents itself as a tree diagram (dendrogram), whose humblest, smallest twigs are formed by the individual members, united at the nodes into groups of brothers, the latter in their turn united at higher-order nodes into groups of cousins, groups of cousins in their turn into even larger groups, into still larger groups, into yet larger groups ..., until finally, at least in theory, the dendrogram encompasses the entire society. The branches of the dendrogram make for integration (for all twins under the same node constitute a united group), and for opposition at the same time: for the nodes at the same level, although united in their turn by a higher-order node at the next level, are still in opposition vis-à-vis one another. And, in fact, this also applies to all groups and individuals tied to each other by the node immediately above them. For this type of structure anthropology has coined the term of ‘segmentary system’. According to Evans-Pritchard,² Nuer society (which was alleged to be representative of many other societies both in Africa and outside) hangs together by the subtle play between segmentary opposition and segmentary integration, both of which invariably present themselves in complementarity. Whether in a particular situation a particular actor will stress opposition or integration, depends on the continually shifting perspective the actor may adopt; in the last analysis, from an *etic* perspective, both positions apply equally. In theory we can tell exactly where this structure meets its boundary: at the point where segmentary integration at the highest level is still possible because of the potentiality of reconciliation after violence.

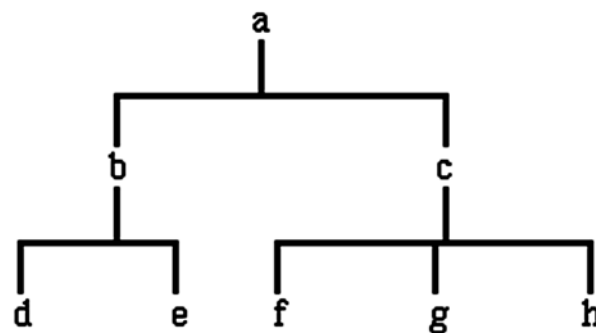


Figure 11.1. A simple system of segmentation

‘d’ and ‘e’ are in segmentary opposition vis-à-vis one another, but they are in segmentary integration as parts of ‘b’ when in opposition to ‘f’, ‘g’, or ‘h’; in the latter event, ‘f’, ‘g’, or ‘h’ will effectively identify as ‘c’ vis-à-vis ‘b’ and any of ‘b’'s constituent elements, i.e. ‘d’ or ‘e’.

¹ Evans-Pritchard 1967: 150. Few Africanist anthropologists today would still speak of ‘tribe’ in this connection, but that is immaterial for our present argument. For related studies of the societies in this region and their internal processes of reconciliation, cf. Greenberg 1971; Owen 1920; Titherington 1924; Simons 1992.

² Evans-Pritchard 1967; cf. Middleton & Tait 1958; Sigrist 1967.

If it turns out that such reconciliation is not possible and that only violence can answer previous violence, then by definition the segmentary distance between the adversaries is too large. One has no option left but to admit that one's adversary is not implied in one's own social order and cannot be approached using that social order's technology of reconciliation.

In the Introduction to this book I have stressed how reconciliation, as a African hermeneutical social technology, at the same time offers a model for intercultural knowledge production. Something very similar is at hand here: the model of complementary opposition, which is the backbone of segmentation as a model of social organisation, has a striking parallel in Derrida's *différance*, which comprises both the opposition and its resolution. It is unnecessary to remind the reader that Derrida hails from Algeria, whose social structure, like that of many Islamic countries, has retained strong elements of segmentation despite the rise of the centralised nation-state.

In Nuer society¹ conflicts were the order of the day, and they were usually accompanied by physical violence. In the case of violent conflict within the village, precautions were taken to prevent a mortal outcome (choice of weapons), but between different villages manslaughter did occur.

The system of segmentation in Nuer society revolved around the contradiction between two norms:

- (a) There is a moral obligation to settle conflicts through mediation, thus effecting reconciliation instead of retaliation. On the other hand, one of the pillars of the lineage organisation is
- (b) the obligation to revenge the murder of an agnate (a patrilineal kinsmen).

This is a typical social contradiction that cannot be resolved by normative or judicial means, but only through a process of reconciliation that transcends such institutional means. The function of the leopard-skin headman and his mediation makes it possible to alleviate these contradictory tendencies and to bring about reconciliation in the place of feud. These headmen (Nuer society is alleged to know no other types of headmen) have no effective material or military power, no great authority, but they do have a special link with the Earth, by virtue of which they may curse people. After killing a person the perpetrator flees to the headman and as long he is in the latter's sanctuary, he cannot be killed. The victim's kinsmen lie in ambush in case the murderer ventures outside his sanctuary. Meanwhile the headman ritually cleanses the killer (one is reminded of the *Oresteia* and dozens of other similar passages in Ancient Greek tragedy). At the same time he sets in motion a process of reconciliation: exhortations to forgiveness, and negotiations about the number of heads of cattle that the murderer's kinsmen are to pay. If this is settled after a few

¹ In the 1930s (when Evans-Pritchard did his fieldwork).

weeks, the murderer can return home and although a general unease lingers on, no counter-murder will be committed.

Evans-Pritchard stresses that the larger the social distance (i.e. the segmentary distance, as measured in terms of the number of distinct elements of the dendrogram connecting them) between the social groups involved, the smaller the chance that the conflict may be settled in this way. Feud characterises the relationships between distant groups, whereas between closely neighbouring villages that by virtue of their proximity share all sorts of ecological interests, the conflict cannot be allowed to persist in its original violent form, and reconciliation is imperative.

11.3.2. Alternative interpretations of the reconciliation process among the Nuer

On this point the Manchester School, as founded by Gluckman in the late 1940s, has explicitly engaged in polemics with Evans-Pritchard's analysis of the political system of the Nuer. Gluckman claimed that we have only learned to understand the dynamics of the reconciliatory process from Elizabeth Colson's study on 'Social control of revenge in the society of the Zambian Plateau Tonga'.¹ According to Gluckman and Colson the key to an understanding of feud and its reconciliation would lie in conflicting loyalty on the part of third parties, who would have equally strong ties with both warring parties especially through affinal relationships. As a result of clan exogamy (the obligation and the practice of marrying outside one's own clan) the entire local community, both among the Nuer and among the Zambian Tonga, is a network, throughout, of affinal relationships. An outburst of conflict, especially in the case of manslaughter, brings a number of individuals to a point where their affines and their consanguineal relatives seek to mobilise these individuals to two camps at the same time. Torn between conflicting loyalties, it is clearly in the interest of these people to solve their personal role conflict by seeking to terminate the conflict as a whole; they can do so by setting in motion the institutionalised mechanism towards reconciliation (through compensatory payments), and by exerting their influence on both parties, persuading them to cease hostilities.

An important step in the understanding of reconciliation in the context of segmentary societies in South Sudan was set more recently by Simon Simonse in his book *Kings of Disaster*.² For Simonse, mediators of the type of the Nuer leopard-skin headman are not merely catalysts, whose contribution to the social process is only indirect and inactive. With the support of a wealth of case material derived from Nilotic societies other than the Nuer, Simonse shows how the dynamics of the relationship between 'mediator' and 'followers' can take all sorts of forms. In many contexts the mediator himself becomes a key figure, charged with the task of giving symbolic form to the social in his capacity of rainmaker; but, on the other hand, if he

¹ Colson 1960; Gluckman 1955, 1965.

² Simonse 1992.

fails in that task, he will become the literal victim, the literal scapegoat, of that same society that is tied to him by a love-hate relationship. The schemes proposed by Frazer and Girard¹ would thus appear to have, albeit in greatly revised and updated form, an applicability that makes us see beyond the mere neutral role of reconciliation processes, and that make us appreciate, in the African context also, the less sociable and less ethical side of the conciliatory role of earth priest, marabout, saint, herald, bard, as well as king – vital social roles in African life whose intercontinental historical dynamics (all intimately connected with the leopard whose skin they tend to wear as a sign of office) I shall explore in my forthcoming book *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots*.

11.4. Reconciliation and the law

In more centralised African political systems the social order results not only from an insecure balance between opposition and integration, nor only from the conflicting loyalties of kinsmen in the course of an informal social process, but also from that eminently African institution, litigation, that is often under the direct patronage of the chief or king.

In purely local litigation, at the village level, it may happen that for the sake of the shared interests of male kinsmen and affines, more profound personal and group conflicts are being dissimulated, and that the socially weaker party in the conflict (women, children, ex-slaves, and, in general, people of low social status) are forced to yield to these interests.² This constitutes a situation of incomplete reconciliation that calls for a continuation of the conflict with other extra judicial means: sorcery, poisoning, slander, suicide. This kind of local litigation does not stand on its own, but is embedded in the total social process of the local community; it may lead to a situation where, just as in the Gluckman/Colson reinterpretation of Evans-Pritchard, litigation may also work towards reconciliation in the context of a small-scale society whose members are tied to each other by multiplex relationships and therefore cannot afford to push a conflict to its extremes merely in the interest of just one group member. In other words, a totally independent court of law is not a probable phenomenon in such a context.

However, if the judges have a greater distance vis-à-vis the local community, if they are linked to a royal court or to a central modern state to which the local village society is subjected, and if the judges identify more with the political order and the legal ideas and ideals of the court and the state than with the ongoing social and political process at the village level, then the insistence on reconciliation at all costs and at the expense of individual interests may be rather more limited.³

¹ Frazer 1911-1915; Girard 1977, 1978.

² For a case in point, cf. van Binsbergen 1977.

³ On the legal dynamics of reconciliation, cf. also van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & Baerends 1981, 1984.

In itself the termination of conflict through adjudication may imply reconciliation. A context for such reconciliation is already provided by the fact that the parties have agreed to put their case before the court (which thus constitutes the shared point of departure whence reconciliation may be obtained), and that a verdict is being pronounced. Lest the parties be held in contempt of court (an offence that is normally heavily sanctioned), such a verdict implies that the conflict must henceforth be considered to be terminated. In such a case the underlying, shared judicial system furnishes implicitly the framework within which reconciliation may be reached.

Such a formal reconciliation, that amounts to the decision not to continue the conflict now that it has been formally adjudicated, may however often be too formal and too distant to convince as a form of genuine reconciliation. In the context of South Central Africa, it is a common phenomenon that after such a formal legal verdict, when the conflict is no longer actionable in court, the conflict is yet carried on, notably with extra-judicial means. If this happens, the judicial termination of conflict manifestly did not produce reconciliation in the meaningful sense of the word. This forces us to look further for such a definition of the concept of reconciliation that would enable us to express why in these cases we are not dealing with genuine reconciliation, contrary to some other cases that also involve the intercession of the courts. It appears that, both at the purely local level and as part of an elaborate national judicial structure, effective reconciliation and the judicial process are far from coterminous. This we could already expect on the basis of our earlier insight that reconciliation begins where the rule of law has been exhausted and does not offer a solution.

11.5. Reconciliation, ritual and therapy

In all this it is important to realise that African village societies – not only those of pastoral semi-nomads like the Nuer, but also those of sedentary cultivators – in general tend to be fairly unstable social units, with a limited time-span.

For instance, among the Zambian Nkoya¹ a village is nothing but a core of kinsmen which, merely because of the members' temporary and somewhat accidental co-residence, happens to stand out among the wider kin group; the latter overlaps with other such groups anyway. Also, because of their limited number of members, their low fertility, their high child mortality, and the prolonged stay of some of their members in urban areas, these localised kinship cores are involved in an incessant, often sinister, competition over members. Someone's position in Nkoya society is primarily determined by the village where he or she dwells at a particular moment in time – but this is only a temporary choice privileging one village and kin core from among several villages and several kin cores to which that person may reckon himself to belong. There are nearly always alternative choices,

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1991a, 1992b.

and often these are effected in the course of time. The village is a spatial given, but in the first place a kinship-political given.¹ One is a 'member' of the village, rather than just an 'inhabitant' of the village. Very frequently this membership is discontinued, trading it for an alternative, by moving house to a different village. On the spur of personal conflicts, illness and death, fear of sorcery, and the ambition to gain a headman's title for oneself, virtually any person in this society continually proceeds, in the first half of his or her life, through a kind of musical chairs, from village to village, in the course of which process ever different villages, kin cores, and senior kinsmen figure as protectors and sponsors. (The pattern is not very different for women and men, albeit that women may also chose non-kinsmen as patrons by marrying them, while over the past hundred years or so they have no longer been eligible to compete for royal and headmanship titles among the Nkoya, contrary to the situation in the more remote past.) In this process, the villages themselves, as concrete localised sets of dwellings, are also far from stable: most villages, as physical conglomerates of dwellings in a specific place, have only a lifespan of ten to twenty years. In practice, therefore, Nkoya villages are temporary sets of relative strangers, who usually have not grown up together, and who are unlikely to die as co-resident neighbours of one another. In their mutual relationships the people concerned are constantly conscious of the optional aspect of their state of co-residence, and they are constantly looking around for opportunities to improve their personal security, mainly through intra-rural moving; here security is defined both in terms of supernatural protection – against illness, death and misfortune – as mediated by the elders (provided these are not exposed to be witches themselves), freedom from sorcery-generating, interminable conflict, and such freedom from hunger and exposure as is provided by ecological plenty.

In order to counteract the chaos that constantly threatens the close relationships between members of this – fairly common – type of African village societies, artifices are needed that deny or dissimulate the opportunist nature of the village as merely a temporary meeting place of relative strangers – artifices that turn these villages into a social context of a much more permanent and inescapable nature, so that their members will be domesticated into consensus and unity. How can this be achieved? Mainly through collective rituals, in which the localised kin core, augmented with members who stay in town but have come over for the occasion, construct their unity and celebrate it through music, dance, sacrifice and prayer. Many African village societies boast an extremely rich repertoire of ritual, and attending forms of music, dance and verbal expression. These forms range from the solitary prayer at the village shrine of the hunter setting forth in the evening or the early morning, via reconciliatory rituals in the restricted circle of close kinsmen around the village shrine after a conflict, to massive life crisis rituals marking a girl's attainment of maturity,² a person's culmination of life in the form of funerary

¹ For the anthropological concept of the politics of kinship, cf. van Velsen 1971.

² See above, chapter 3.

celebrations, and finally the crucial ritual of name inheritance a year or so after the demise of a senior kinsman or kinswoman.

Ritual creates the possibility of reconciliation even if, or precisely if, the law cannot be involved because subjecting to external adjudication is seen as a breach, from the public social space, into the intimacy of the secluded social space of solidarity and of face-to-face relationships, such as exist in the family, the village, the small group of solidary neighbours in an urban ward, a circle of friends or co-religionists. In the African context, therapy and ritual can scarcely be told apart: to every ritual a therapeutic effect is attributed, and although there are pragmatic therapies whose religious component is merely implied and does not become overt, yet outside the sphere of cosmopolitan medicine there are few African therapeutic situations that do not have a predominantly religious component. Reconciliation with the supernatural is a central datum in African ritual and therapy:

- with the ancestor through prayer, libation and other offerings at an ancestral shrine;
- with a spirit – ancestral or otherwise – which manifests itself through possession and is subsequently propitiated by the possessed person joining the specific cult of that spirit;
- with the High God in a historic local religious idiom;
- with the Holy Spirit, Christ, God, peace with whom is made through conversion to African Independent Christian churches; and, alternatively, with Allah through the intercession of Islamic specialists and saints.

Usually reconciliation with the supernatural implies an idiom in whose context also, and particularly, the reconciliation between living participants in the ritual can be achieved. We note a triangular relationship: conceptually, if not in reality, the supernatural mediates between human A in conflict with human B, and this opens up the following specific possibilities in the context of ritual, religious reconciliation: by contrast with judicial and socio-political reconciliation, the indirect mediation between two humans via the supernatural third party makes it possible for the reconciliation process to be cast in purely religious and symbolic terms. As a consequence, the precise contradictions and conflicts having caused the conflict in the first place, may remain unarticulated, implied, even dissimulated. In ritual settings the cosmology derived from the religious world view tends to be the source of common redressive understanding. However, the dramatic re-recognition of each other's shared humanity may remain at the ritualised, pious, even bigoted level, without effective transference from the ritual setting to situations of everyday life, and if that is the case, ritual reconciliation would not be the most effective and lasting form of reconciliation in the long run.

Under certain conditions, including the strict demarcation of space and time as specifically ritual and therefore no longer general or ordinary, ritual produces the possibility of proceeding to reconciliation as a temporal but repetitive phase in a

context that is otherwise marked by conflict and violence. Examples of such altered, no-longer-general, space and time are: annual fairs, saints' festivals, pilgrimages in the world of Islam and Christianity as well as elsewhere – as we have already discussed above.

It is the symbolic technology of ritual which offers the conceptual possibility of resolving, against all odds, otherwise unsolvable contradictions, opening up a repertoire of cultural elements that are available for bricolage and that allow the skilful mediator to bring out, often by sleight of hand, such unexpected communality and shared humanity as may strike the conflicting parties as revelatory, and exhort them to terminate their hostilities. The symbolic technology achieves this by forcing a breach into the spatio-temporal rationality in which rules and facts are supposed to be sacrosanct, immutable, well-defined, inflexible, bounded, and where, for that reason, conflicting positions, once logically and conceptually based, cannot be shifted. The social technology of reconciliation, therefore, is capable of negotiating hard binary oppositions; it is a shield or a sanctuary from the sheer violence of conceptual rationality.¹ Such technology yet allows, against all odds, the termination of conflicts that otherwise would be deemed irresolvable, in view of their solid anchorage in accepted, but mutually exclusive, social values of the two groups of participants involved. The advantage of appealing to a supernatural being for conflict resolution is that such beings – contrary to ordinary objects and persons – are infinitely flexible and plastic as regards the empirical manifestations allegedly marking their presence in the world of the senses; the human reconciling agent (a religious specialist) makes use of this plasticity in order, creatively, to bring the manifestations to be attributed to the invoked supernatural being in line with the case at hand. By doing so he makes reconciliation a possibility precisely when such reconciliation would have been ruled out on purely human grounds, at the strictly concrete and rational level. In many parts of Africa, ritual, especially under the experienced guidance of a diviner-priest-therapist, offers the possibility of externalising and sublimating the conflict between humans, transforming it into a conflict between humans and the supernatural. And most human cultures know how to handle the latter kind of conflict – through sacrifices and other rites. Such a way of dealing with conflict between two human parties by invoking the supernatural as a third party would still amount to reconciliation, but, as it were, over the top of their heads. Therapy and ritual are the means *par excellence* for the production of reconciliation in an extra-social, extra-human framework: reconciliation, not with humans (who may be dead, unapproachable, inconsolable, hurt beyond repair – the twentieth century has regrettably offered striking examples: the Holocaust, the Palestinian case, the apartheid state, the Rwanda genocide of 1994) but via symbols, in which the supernatural presents itself so that a judicial or politicised solution, which would no longer work, is rendered unnecessary. In this respect, such

¹ On the violence of rationality, cf. Schroeder 1996; Schott 1988; McKenna 1992; Derrida 1967b: chapter 4 (on violence and metaphysics with reference to Levinas); Wyschogrod 1989.

reconciliation as is achieved in the ritual-therapeutic context is of a fundamentally different nature to that achieved in the judicial and socio-political domain.

11.6. Sorcery and social conflict at a macro scale: Two limits to the African symbolic technology of reconciliation

Now, let us not lull ourselves to sleep, as if everything in historic African societies in the fields of law, therapy and ritual were only geared to bringing about and maintaining beautiful, pure and perfect social relationships as a result of reconciliation. This is a romantic, nostalgic image, which emerged in response, both to the atrocities of the contemporary African experience and to the realisation that North Atlantic, increasingly global, society, has also, despite its economic, political, military and symbolic hegemony, totally failed to provide us with a meaningful and humanly profound future. So why not follow the lead of the Afrocentrists and cherish historic African alternatives for North Atlantic culture? Of course, that is what we should do (in the present book, chapters 7, 8 and 14, among others, offer extensive guidelines in this respect), but we should do so only on the basis of grounded knowledge about African socio-cultural realities, not on the basis of mere wishful projections of our own, African or North Atlantic or global, personal predicaments. The only convincing form of Afrocentrism is the one based, not on semi-intellectual myth, but on the methodologically underpinned representation of present-day African practices and modes of thought, and of a painstaking empirical reconstruction of Africa's past.

African societies did develop extraordinarily effective means in the judicial, therapeutic and ritual domains, through which to prepare reconciliation and to bring it about. But, on the other hand, these societies did need these very means precisely because the social chaos, the distress and the annihilation that were constantly present as a threatening undercurrent. More so than in other societies? That is a question outside the scope of my present argument.

The sinister side of the short-lived euphoria of harmony in the African village during or immediately after reconciliation is the constant suspicion of possible witchcraft, especially on the part of close kinsmen and neighbours.¹ Without conflict there is no reconciliation, and the alternative to reconciliation is conflict that does not lead to reconciliation but that instead mobilises to the full extent man's destructive capabilities and fantasies. Parallel to the group process (with its tendency to a cycle of reconciliation, conflict, fission) there is a cosmology, a system of thought defining the world of and around man in such terms as:

- order, sociability, mutual reciprocity, peace, or alternatively
- disorder, anti-sociability, conflict and violence, both overt physical violence and violence in the form of sorcery and poisoning.

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 2001b.

In addition to the image – so welcome in a superficially nostalgic view – of Africa (of course, an Africa aggregated into an artificial, undifferentiated whole beyond recognition) as a specialist domain for the technology of reconciliation at the micro level, there is the equally widely broadcast image of Africa as the homeland of witchcraft, of humankind's sinister daydreams aimed at the desire for extravagant powers, riches and knowledge, and of the cynical manipulation of humans and their so very vulnerable bodies in order to reach these goals. The African leader who on the outside is supposed to be the master of palaver and reconciliation, according to a complementary but equally vocal local social discourse, may be the greatest witch around. The reconciliation that to outsiders makes the African village appear one-sidedly as a site of innocent peacefulness, is in fact a reconciliation in conflicts that are in the most literal sense mortal.

Sorcery, at least in large parts of Africa, constitutes an instructive limiting concept for the study of reconciliation. Sorcery is, in a nutshell, those forms of anti-social transgression that are not self-evidently eligible for reconciliation; in other words,¹ it constitutes the boundary conditions of the kinship-based social order. Hence people's resorting to private execution, violence, lynching of alleged witches, as alternatives to reconciliation – and when such distressful and tragic means of conflict resolution are chosen, the actors legitimate their choice by reference to their adversary's real or alleged acts of sorcery, by which they have allegedly placed themselves outside the collectivity of a shared humanity. The fundamental thought behind African sorcery might be described as the collective recognition of the fact that humans may occasionally act in an absolutely egoistic, absolutely anti-social manner. The witch (who does not have to be a real person but may mainly exist in the form of his suspected victims' anxieties and rumour) is supposed to have opted out of the social and symbolic world of humans, and therefore cannot readily be reconfirmed as participant in that world through reconciliation. However, the African judicial, therapeutic and ritual practice is, most fortunately and instructively, not one of iron consistency. Even in the sphere of sorcery, mechanisms of reconciliation and reintegration may be found: the ordeal, redressive purification, submission to punishment, or neutralising of the accusation. Procedures exist through which the person suspected of sorcery may seek to prove beyond reasonable doubt that he or she is not a witch, and hence that he or she, on second thoughts, does deserve – albeit only after reconciliation – admission once more to the world of humans. If this should fail, what awaits the sorcerers is their diabolisation: the confirmation of their inhumanity by the most inhuman mutilation and killing.

While thus sorcery, as the opposite to reconciliation, is built into the very model of the African village society, there is, as I said, another limiting concept to the African technology of reconciliation. This is the fact that such reconciliation can seldom be seen to be effectively applied at the meso and macro level, i.e. at more

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 2001b.

comprehensive levels than the small-scale communities of village and urban wards. In the study of reconciliation we must distinguish between various levels of scope and relevance. The African technology of reconciliation at the micro level has so far not shown itself to be capable of containing the most destructive conflicts at the meso and macro level, such as tend to occur in the modern, post-colonial state. Ethnic violence, genocide, civil war, banditism, the total falling apart of the state in at least a dozen contemporary African national territories, are sufficient indications of the truth of this depressing statement. Less dramatic instances of the failure of African reconciliation at the meso level may be recognised in the continuing fission of African Christian churches (so that, usually after conflicts over leadership and finance, new break-away churches originate all the time from more established churches), and in general in the relatively limited success of African formal organisation in the economic, bureaucratic, medical and educational domain.

Is this fairly negative record really due to the lack of potential and applicability of the African social technology of reconciliation? Or is it that, with the inroads of globalisation through colonialism, education, world religions, formal organisations, global media, and universal aspirations for personal commoditised consumption, we have not even tried to exploit this potential fully, transforming African reconciliation and making it work in the modern setting that is so much more explosive, and on which so much more depends, than was foreseen when this technology of reconciliation was first instituted in a village context. African reconciliation, in principle, contains the potential of creative, selective reformulation for whatever context, whatever level, whatever conflict.

This argument was written with a very specific macro-level contemporary African situation of reconciliation in mind: the redress of social relations within South Africa, after the advent of democracy has terminated the inequalities and atrocities of the apartheid state. In this connection the shared humanity, to which my argument on reconciliation has appealed repeatedly, has a clear-cut local vernacular equivalent in the concept of *ubuntu*, i.e. ‘being human’, ‘humanity’, ‘the art of being human’ – a concept to be explored further in chapter 14. Over the past decade, South Africa has seen the emergence of an African philosophy of *ubuntu*, in which the historic cultures of Southern Africa are selectively scanned for ideas and principles that may inspire social and managerial problem-solving in the transition from a racist to a democratic conception of the urban mass society of South Africa. Here, and in many other African contexts, we can see the dynamics of a local *emic*¹ conceptualisation of the concept of ‘humanity’ in concrete situations of reconciliation.² Over the past few years, South African managers, constitutional lawyers and other intellectuals have dabbled in a largely nostalgic rekindling of the concept of *ubuntu* as a means of massaging current transformation processes away from open conflict and open confrontation, no matter what the inequalities and injustices that may be

¹ For the paired concepts of *emic* and *etic*, cf. section 15.3.1.

² Cf. Prinsloo 1998; Mbigi & Maree 1995; Ramose 1999; Louw n.d.

involved. Contemporary South Africa is a society that has more to forget than it can possibly, humanly forgive. It has just gone through the exercise of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the basis of a Christian model of confession and forgiveness, for which I do not see many roots in the African technology of reconciliation as I have tried to understand, apply and describe it. Here fundamental lessons may be learned from the African tradition of a social technology of reconciliation.

PART V.

EXERCISES IN INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

Some philosophical aspects of cultural globalisation

with special reference to Mall's intercultural hermeneutics

12.1. Introduction: Towards a philosophy of globalisation?

From the early 1990s the topic 'globalisation' has seen an enormous expansion, first in economics and soon also in the social and cultural sciences. That the Dutch-Flemish Day of Philosophy 1999 was devoted to this topic is almost a breakthrough: philosophers have largely ignored globalisation. If one searches the Internet for the combination of 'philosophy' and 'globalisation', using any of the usual search machines, one can expect only a meagre harvest; considering that philosophy is in general well represented on that medium, this appears to be a reliable indication of a genuine paucity of interest. One hit would be the website of former Dutch prime minister Ruud Lubbers, who subsequently held the chair of globalisation studies in Tilburg, the Netherlands, prior to becoming the United Nation's leading officer for refugee work; in articulating the philosophical aspects of globalisation Lubbers' website does not proceed beyond Popper and Teilhard de Chardin, neither of whom use the word 'globalisation' in their works.¹ Already in 1988 Herra came with a 'Kritik der Globalphilosophie'.² More recently Paulin Hountondji appealed to members of African cultures to rise in protest against the globalisation process.³ In the same year Richard Rorty honoured a South American collective volume on globalisation studies with the following frivolous characterisation of the phenomenon (note his concatenation of negative stereotypes), incidentally one that

¹ <http://www.globalize.org>. For Lubbers' reasons to parade Popper as a philosopher of globalisation, see there. Moreover cf. Teilhard de Chardin 1955 (where the quasi-mystical term 'planetarisation' is being launched, but according to a natural-science model which does not do justice to the agency, the complex interdependence and interaction between the constituting parts and the reduction of the costs of time and space, all of which are characteristic of globalisation).

² Herra 1988.

³ Hountondji 1997.

entirely concentrates on the economic dimension of globalisation ignoring the social cultural dimension:

‘...now that the financing of business enterprise is a matter of drawing upon a global pool of capital, so that enterprises in Belo Horizonte or in Chicago are financed by money held in the Cayman Islands by Serbian warlords, Hong Kong gangsters, and the kleptocrat presidents of African republics, there is no way in which the laws of Brazil or the US can dictate that money earned in the country will be spent in the country, or money saved in the country invested in the country.’¹

Besides this deterring example set by the leading USA philosopher, I can see a number of reasons for the philosophers’ reticence vis-à-vis globalisation. In the first place the theoretical status of the concept of globalisation was initially so poor that the concept was distrusted for being merely a pretext for the raising of research funds. However, it has not remained so intellectually barren. The 1990s have seen a spate of social-science research on globalisation. In the Postscript to chapter 4² I have listed these trends and briefly indicated their significance.

Secondly, North Atlantic philosophy is still characterised by a certain myopia; hence it only hesitantly dares to address problematics other than those directly derived from the North Atlantic, urban, industrialised, contemporary society and the experience it generates. Except for a handful of intercultural and comparative philosophers, most philosophers feel literally ill at home in the field of globalisation. For, even though globalisation can be conceived, to a considerable extent, as the worldwide penetration – in principle, comfortably recognisable – of precisely that type of society where most North Atlantic philosophers are at home, the globalisation process entails creative responses, both inside ‘the South’ itself, and up North, as an aspect of South penetration of migrants and their cultural forms into the North Atlantic part of the world. A third, crucial, point is that in many respects philosophers have *not* been lagging behind but have, on the contrary, spearheaded the identification of, and the reflection upon, themes that are now recognised to be central in the globalisation process. For example, the conceptualisation of compressed time in the context of the Internet, as a major technological context for globalisation, leans heavily on ideas concerning post-phonocentric time as formulated, decades ago, by Derrida and Rorty.³ A large part of the problematic that now is being addressed under the heading of globalisation has been explored for much longer, and much more profoundly, by philosophers, under such headings as identity, pluralism, relativism, media, postmodernity, the consumption society, comparative and intercultural philosophy, the end of the Western construction of subjectivity, the philosophy of information and communication.

Philosophy is the dialogical development of a special language that expresses, in an innovative manner, aporias of the human experience as characteristic of the

¹ Rorty 1997: 464.

² Section 4.9.5.

³ Cf. Sandbothe 1998; Rorty 1982: 90f, 1989: 122f, 1991: II 85-128; Derrida 1967a, 1967b.

philosopher's own historical situation (although such expression usually includes references to other times and other places). Philosophy thus rooted is a concrete spatio-temporal collective situation, whence it derives its empirical impetus and its touchstone. Whether 'globalisation' will turn out to be a fashionable sham problem (as Rorty seems to suggest), or on the contrary will turn out to sum up one of the core problems of our times, depends on the empirical answer to the question as to the scope of the qualitative and quantitative recent changes that are subsumed under the heading of globalisation. The empirical research of globalisation is obviously not the philosopher's task, but a spate of recent empirical research has demonstrated that globalisation does indeed entail profound changes and has far reaching effects. It does create crucial aporias in the contemporary experience fit for philosophical exploration.

12.2. Aspects of globalisation

In the first instance, globalisation was encountered as transnational movements of capital along electronic media, a phenomenon gaining importance in the late 1980s. This recent transformation of the capitalist mode of production is the dominant context of contemporary globalisation. The economic dimension of globalisation has remained crucial even though we choose to concentrate, in the rest of the present chapter, on the social and cultural aspects of globalisation.

We could define¹ globalisation as the social elaboration of the fact that technology has practically effected – towards the end of the twentieth century of the North Atlantic Common Era – a reduction to zero, of time and space as limiting factors in human communication. In this way globalisation means a profound transformation, not only of the economy but of the contemporary experience as a whole. This transformation may be discussed under a number of different headings:

- proto-globalisation
- the panic of space
- the panic of time
- the panic of language
- rebellion against older inequalities
- the new object
- virtualisation of the experience
- the new inequality
- the new body.

¹ The literature offers many definitions of globalisation; cf. Featherstone 1990, 1995; Meyer & Geschiere 1998; Fardon *et al.* 1999; Griffin & Rahman 1992; Hirst & Thompson 1996; Kearney 1995; King 1991; Nederveen Pieterse 1994; Robertson 1992; Robertson & Lechner 1985; Soares 1997; van der Veer 1996; Waters 1995; Bauman 1998; Adda 1998; Warnier 1999. For my contributions to this debate, cf. van Binsbergen 1995b, 1997f, 1998a.

12.2.1. Proto-globalisation

Previous technologies of communication and information (from the footpath and the face-to-face conversation, to talking drums, horse-riding and the sailing ship) constructed narrow horizons, that were soon to be breached by newer technologies. This is a process as old as humanity itself. Every successive technological innovation had as a potential or actual implication the reduction of the cost of time and space. Therefore many forms of proto-globalisation can be traced in the millennia that lie behind us, until we lose track round about 3000 BCE. Such forms include: imperial states; promissory notes, cheques and bonds amounting to a complete separation between increasingly virtualised circulation and actual production; trade networks and cultic networks that may encompass many social and cultural local contexts even though in most other respects these local contexts may have been very different from one other. All these features applied already in the New Babylonian and Assyrian empires of the second and first millennium before the Common Era.¹ However, under these older technological conditions space and time continued to exact a heavy tax. Characteristic of the latest few decades only is the reduction of space and time to practically zero: enormously voluminous flows of communication at near light speed where information and electronic commands are involved. And where persons and material goods are concerned, speeds of just under 1000 km/hr have become normal in air transportation. This is why we are justified to reserve the term 'globalisation' in the narrower sense to our time and age.

12.2.2. The panic of space

Under conditions of globalisation, the new home is nowhere, the new boundary is situational and constructed, the new identity is performative (multiculturality!); the new Other is the uninvited messenger of globalisation: as a migrant, as an applicant for refugee status, as a fellow-European in a European Union that still means little to its citizens, as a non-co-religionist, as someone who is somatically conspicuously different, as a disembodied partner in electronic communication. The construction of identities around ethnicity and culture is one of the most important phenomena in the contemporary world, as an expression of the tendency – constantly increasing all over the world – towards subjective self-definition within newly constructed particularistic spaces: well-defined identities.

12.2.3. The panic of time

Globalisation brings about discontinuity vis-à-vis the recent past, but especially the collapse of the specific spatial frameworks (the family, the work floor, the neighbourhood, the community, the nation-state) within which, under the previous technologies for the production of the past, a person's activities were practically confined as a context for the experience of time and for the budgeting of time; their

¹ Postgate 1992; Roux 1985.

technologies formed an embedding for the creation of values and meaning that has now been eroded or even lost.

12.2.4. The panic of language

The specific language recognised as one's own has provided the communicative embedding for the many meaning-carrying 'homes' constructed under previous technologies so as to exist side by side. At the same time globalisation has furthered the general acceptance, in practice at least, of an assumption of the self-evident convertibility between language domains.¹ This is not to deny or ignore Quine's principle of the indeterminacy of translation, but simply to state the empirical fact that present-day global communicative practices (in ICT, international trade and consumption, international academic life, international constitutional and diplomatic practices, etc.) are largely based on the implicit assumption that translation is eminently possible and meaningful. Contemporary philosophical practices of multilingual handling of philosophical texts are based on the same assumption. So, on the one hand, language is a basis for bounded identity construction, on the other hand, the secluded domains that such a construction derives from language is constantly being invaded and denied by the inroads of translation to and from the outside world. This produces a tension between meaninglessness on the one hand, and versus the deliberate construction of distinctive new domains on the other.

12.2.5. Rebellion against older inequalities

More than ever before, the globalisation process has brought together a multitude of reflexively conscious, and militant, identities within one and the same political space. Each of these identities creates a world view that is meaningful for those subscribing to that identity, but not to others who subscribe to different identities. Thrown together within one political arena, these worlds collide and become partial, since they can no longer dissimulate the presence of other such worlds. A central bone of contention then is the mutual relationship between these partial worlds: is that relationship co-ordinative, sub-ordinative, evolutionary, based on class exploitation? The *raison d'être* of the *Black Athena* debate, Afrocentrism, politically radical Post-colonial Theory,² and revolutionary Islamism, is that these expressions propagate world models deviating from the dominant Eurocentric hierarchical (or hegemonic) model; the struggle between world models reflects the inequalities between those identifying with these worlds, and the long-standing struggles to consolidate, contest, or terminate these inequalities.

¹ Hookway 1993; Wright 1999; Quine 1960, 1970, 1990b. For a more extensive discussion of the problem of translatability, cf. section 15.3.3.

² For political-radical post-colonial theory, cf. Rattansi 1994. For Afrocentrism, cf. Berlinerblau 1999. For the *Black Athena* debate, cf. Berlinerblau 1999, Mudimbe 1992a, and: van Binsbergen 1997a, 1996a; also see above, section 15.11.

12.2.6. The new object

Under globalisation, the subject – as the historical result of pre-globalisation relations of production within a limited horizon confined by previous technologies – dissolves in the consumption of commodified objects, whose industrial aesthetics canalises desire if such desire happens to be gratified, and stirs up desire if left without gratification.¹

12.2.7. Virtualisation² of the experience

Under globalisation, man-machine interaction, and man-machine-man interaction, are rapidly replacing the older technologies of direct bodily contact with one's surroundings and with other people.

12.2.8. The new inequality

Under globalisation, and more specifically because ICT has reduced, to virtually zero, time and space as constraints upon human interaction, omnipresence and immediacy of action (once divine attributes) have become technological instruments for the creation and consolidation of power. On a global scale, ICT-based omnipresence and immediacy of action have become taken-for-granted attributes of the inhabitants of the North Atlantic region (equipped as they are with telephones, cell-phones, personal computers, motorcars, airline tickets, etc.); on closer scrutiny, of course, within this global elite a further, internal elite may be discerned, with a comparatively excessive technological profile. Under these circumstances, the power inequalities that characterised late capitalism (labour/capital, citizen/state, colony/motherland, young/old, woman/man, ignorant/educated) are compressed into contradictions between

- (a) those who anonymously control and dictate the technology;
- (b) the powerless but privileged users of that technology, and
- (c) the globally predominant mass, concentrated in the South, of people who are excluded.

The globalisation process is thus the expression of fundamental contradictions in the world today, mirroring a crucial struggle for power.

12.2.9. The new body

Globalisation goes hand in hand with a changing concept of the person, and especially of the body: as a locus of the experience of freedom (experiencing liberties to consume, to adorn, to gratify, to be intimate) in regard to the older inequalities summed up above, but also as a locus of cultural distinction through

¹ Cf. Fardon *et al.* 1999.

² Cf. my work on virtuality: 1997f, 1998a.

consumption, and thus as the condition for the surreptitious installation of the new inequalities.

12.3. An invitation to philosophising

For philosophy the developments around globalisation mean more than just a handful of new questions to be approached by the time-honoured methods of the discipline. It is no exaggeration to say that these developments undermine the very position from which philosophising can take place. Not only transport, politics and cosmologies, but also philosophy displays the characteristics of previous technologies. This is the case since philosophy is a form of intersubjective language-based communication, typically using one specific language for at least the duration of one distinct communication event, and it does so within a self-evident collective home (the faculty, the school, the movement, the mainstream, the specific continental tradition, of philosophy) that tends to define itself both by demarcation in space and by (none too extensive) continuity over time. Such concepts as the philosophising *subject*, the *I*, *meaning*, *truth*, presuppose a home, that is being undermined by the relativistic awareness of the cultural constructedness of that home. Globalisation confronts us with the overwhelming plurality of homes, none of which can convincingly claim absolute validity any more even though within each of these many homes the parochial claim of such absolute validity may be heard with greater eloquence and force than ever before. For examples, we just have to remind ourselves of the (largely fictitious, mythical) claims made today within such contemporary 'homes' as: Christian fundamentalism, revolutionary Islamism, the international community upholding human rights by treaties between states, the worldwide community of educated people upholding the universal validity of modern natural science.

An important question in all this is: what are the distinct parts out of which, under conditions of globalisation, the global whole of human experience might be constituted? What is their nature, how do they relate to one another? The general assumption is that we are dealing here with a plurality of cultures. In chapter 15 of this book I will argue at length that cultures do not exist (at least, *not any more*) in the sense of discrete bounded units that are closed into themselves and that produce a field in which it is possible for a human being to lead a total life, from morning till evening and from birth till death. Instead what is involved is a plurality of overlapping cultural orientations, in such a way that each person is always involved in a multiple of such orientations at the same time, while none of these orientations coincides with only one society or only one territory, many of them having a very wide distribution in space and even in time. Contemporary conditions of globalisation have brought out more than ever the fact that no cultural situation is homogeneous, and that cultural specificity can only occur by virtue of effective boundary management against the inroads of a global field of cultural alternatives. Nonetheless one is justified to distinguish as least as many distinct domains of

signification as there are distinct languages available within the globalised world field.

After our kaleidoscopic introduction of globalisation, this leads to the central philosophical question of the present chapter. The globalisation process presupposes a plurality of domains (each usually the focus of a distinct identity). These have been separately constructed and have been internally structured by processes of signification that are predominantly embedded in language. Within a shared social political field intensive communication is continuously brought about. The structuring of each of these domains is highly specific in cultural and linguistic respect. *Then how is it possible that intercultural knowledge is produced at all, and that it is produced in one of the distinct languages involved in the intercultural encounter, notably the language of the intercultural philosopher (or ethnographer) reporting on the encounter?*

We shall consider this question in the light of the intercultural hermeneutics as developed by the German-Indian philosopher Mall.¹

12.4. Mall's intercultural hermeneutics

No misunderstanding should arise about the stakes of the following discussion. Mall occupies in Germany a position similar to the one that my illustrious predecessor in the Rotterdam chair of intercultural philosophy, Heinz Kimmerle, occupied in the Netherlands in the first half of the 1990s: that of the pioneer and leading intercultural philosopher. I concentrate on Mall's approach to intercultural hermeneutics because it offers the greatest promise. Both as an intercultural philosopher and as an empirical social anthropologist I realise only too well the seriousness of the problems with which colleagues such as Kimmerle and Mall are struggling. I am an anthropologist by training, and if I bring to bear on the argument Mall's personal situation or rather the sociology of knowledge characteristic of that situation, it is because anthropologists have learned to view intercultural knowledge production as a personal struggle involving, requiring even, the total mobilisation of personal identities within a specific socio-political field of knowledge production. The anthropological habitus is rather different from that of philosophers, who² refrain from the argument *ad hominem* and consider it distasteful, but who as a result of the same stance, and despite their lip-service to self-reflexivity, tend to shy away from any consideration of the network of social relations, as well as the values and the world view, informing their own image of man and their own production of knowledge. Elsewhere,³ I have indicated that I certainly do not consider the

¹ Mall 1995.

² Unless when they are under the spell of professional condescension, feel threatened, or hurt self-esteem has blinded them with rage – conditions which are not absolutely unknown in Philosophers' Land, as my current fieldwork there indicates.

³ E.g. chapter 15, and well as the Introduction.

anthropological mediation as superior to the intercultural philosophical mediation. Let us simply admit that in the study of interculturality we are dealing with one of the greatest problems of our times – we cannot afford the risk of obscuring underlying complexities and contradictions simply for the sake of social decorum. A leading thought should be that the critical perspectives we apply to others, apply *a fortiori* to ourselves; the present book provides the reader with plenty of opportunities for personal criticism *ad hominem*, and no doubt these opportunities will be utilised in full.

Like most intercultural philosophers, Mall appears to subscribe to the apparently self-evident conception of humanity as being subdivided in a manageable number of *cultures*, each of which is assumed to be unproblematically situated in time and space. For Mall, such cultures are the units between which the *intercultural* 'understanding' has to be achieved. Mall does not exaggerate the boundaries between cultures, and admits their interpenetration, but with this qualification still endorses the model of 'cultures', in the plural.

Mall begins his argument on intercultural hermeneutics full of hope and expectation. Clearly he does not rule out the possibility of intercultural understanding – and should we not take him himself as a clear proof, as an Indian with a Cologn doctorate (1963) and a professorial chair in Hamburg? Mall appeals to the development of the hermeneutic tradition from the seventeenth century (of the North Atlantic Common Era) onwards, and stresses a type of hermeneutic model

'which takes the insight "We are all human beings" more seriously than it has ever been taken.'¹

In passing, we note that it is apparently only under very special – but still to be specified – new conditions that, as Mall says, the fellow-humanity of the other may be taken more seriously than ever; especially now, in the beginning of the third millennium, after a century that has seen far more massive wars, genocide, exclusion, organised interethnic and intercultural hatred than any century ever before, these conditions are not self-evident, although the beginning of this chapter suggests that these conditions can be subsumed under the heading of globalisation.

Here, the important thing, for Mall, is tolerantly to acknowledge that the Other differs from that which one considers one's own:

'The theory of open hermeneutics is based on a conception of knowledge which does not incorporate that which it seeks to understand, which does not adapt the latter to its own mode of thought. The fact that we learn from experience is in itself a cognitive, epistemological element. This provides an experience-based ground for cognitive multiplicity.'²

¹ Original:

'das die Einsicht "Wir alle sind Menschen" ernster nimst, als es je geschehen is.' Mall 1995: 69.

This is possibly an allusion to the principle of shared humanity or principle of charity as developed by Davidson 1984 and Grandy 1973; also cf. Lepore 1993; Malpas 1988; McGinn 1977.

² Original:

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And, for Mall, misunderstanding is immediately implied in understanding, for he quotes Jaspers affirmatively: just as, in the personal intercourse (in the general social sense, not *per se* sexually) between people, in the midst of the greatest intimacy suddenly a rift of consciousness of distance may yawn, when one becomes conscious of an alarming distance separating the persons involved:

‘as if the assumption of incapability of being different, is torn, and in the last analysis cannot be acknowledged, because the demand of shared engagement with the middle of eternity does not terminate (and it is from this that a better understanding is sought over and over again) – this is how it is between Asia and Europe.’¹

Now this is scarcely the promise of intercultural encounter and understanding we are looking for; Mall’s position here appears to be only a slight advance as compared to Kipling’s rendering of the colonial adage (from which he himself took distance, however) one century ago, at the height of the colonial project organised around social segregation, exclusion and subordination:

‘East is East and West is West
and never the twain shall meet’.

Here, with Jaspers and by implication with Mall, there is still the same absolutising of geopolitical constructs of the East and the West as if these were self-evident, workable categories, each forming a unit unto itself and evidently neither overlapping with the other – as if the experience and (as forms of cultural programming!) the practical knowledge and skills of a cab driver in Calcutta or Bombay does not have at least just as much in common with those of a cab driver in London or New York, as it has in common with that of many of the Indian cab driver’s non-cab-driving fellow-nationals, for example strict Brahmans involved in Sanskrit studies and ritual leadership in the countryside, or rich industrialists and merchants who move with the same studied ease in, and between, London and New York as in their own heavily guarded mansions in Bombay.

A theoretical position like Mall’s (or any other person’s, for that matter, including my own or the reader’s) can scarcely be detached from the holder’s own sociological position within the world system. Here the tension between his Indian background and his brilliant German academic achievements have inspired him to formulate an intercultural philosophy that combines respect for non-European

‘Die Theorie einer offenen Hermeneutik geht von einem Erkenntnisbegriff aus, der das zu Verstehende nicht einverleibt, nicht der eigenen Denkform anpaßt. Die Tatsache, daß uns Erfahrung lehrt, ist selbst ein kognitives, epistemologisches Element. Es gibt eine auf Erfahrung beruhende Basis für die kognitive Vielfalt.’ Mall 1995: 68f.

¹ Original:

‘als ob ein Nicht-anders-sein-Können sich trennte und dies im letzten Grunde doch nicht anerkennen will, weil die Forderung der gemeinsamen Bezogenheit auf die Mitte der Ewigkeit nicht aufhört, daher ein besseres Verstehen immer wieder gesucht wird – so ist es zwischen Asien und Abendland.’ Mall 1995: 69; cf. Jaspers 1980.

philosophy with the application – as if this were self-evident – of a conceptual apparatus forged within the North Atlantic tradition, in order to discuss that non-European philosophy. My suggestion is that Mall, having made the transition from India to Germany in his personal life, did not have much of an option in occupying the ambiguous philosophical position that he does. But if this were really true – if Mall because of the particular social identity that he has privately constructed for himself could scarcely have afforded himself a different theoretical option, then the specific theoretical option that he has taken loses much of its power to convince.

Behind this lurks a problematic that is inherent in the language-based nature of the type of philosophical understanding that is sought in intercultural hermeneutics. Theoretically we may take a distance from the medium (in this case the contemporary German language and the philosophical technical terms of the professional specialist), arguing that that medium is accidental and merely local. Yet, because of its dictate over the form and the contents of statements that are expressly intended to be intercultural, this medium does produce a universalist impression; in fact, it does take the place of a touchstone that is situated at an unattainably higher and more valid level than that on which the matter is situated that it seeks to comprehend: the cultural other and the latter's manifestations. Such a medium can certainly claim to understand the other but it cannot live up to such a claim – in fact it insists, rather smugly, on such a degree of non-understanding as is implied in the imposition of a different language from that of the cultural other. The language and the culturally programmed format that we use for philosophical communication, cannot constantly deny their own impact even though we know full well, and admit, that however syntactically and conceptually impeccable, yet as rendering of reality our language use is accidental, optional, unintentionally structuring, preliminary, mumbling, stammering In modern philosophy neologisms and grammatical oddities are admissible to a limited degree, but even these are merely relative deviations within a firmly given phonological, lexical and syntactic structure that dictatorially penetrates into every philosophical statement. At any rate, this structure lends hegemonically a greater validity to philosophical statements, and to their implied rule-governed syntactic structure, than to that which they describe. At the moment that the interpreter's language is being used, that language's laws rule supreme, creating as it were an illusion of universality for these laws, however specific they are to only one language. The claimed equivalence between

- (a) the interpreter and
- (b) the person whose expressions are being interpreted,

is only a rhetorical gesture – in fact, the old card-player's wisdom¹ (however manipulative and treacherous) applies, to the effect that 'who keeps the score, wins a

¹ An attempt to render, by an expression which does not yet exist in English, the Dutch card-players' adage 'Wie schrijft die blijft'.

lot more' – whoever describes, records, has dominance, and reduces the other, however respectfully, to a state of being subjugated to the structuring (the world architecture) which is implied in the recorder's own language. On second thoughts, once the statement has been made, the interpreter may seek to deny the compulsive nature of his own language structuring, and may try to mitigate that one-sidedly imposed ordering – but this can never be done at the moment of the statement itself: the statement is about something else, not about its own structure, and – given the exceptionally high level of regulation typical of language – if one were to deviate substantially from that normative structure this would destroy the statement as well-formed and meaningful in the interpreter's specific language.

I have the impression that in the last analysis Mall himself sees the problem of intercultural hermeneutics in similar terms as sketched by me here: as a balancing act between misplaced universality and distressing relativistic fragmentation. I derive this impression from the way in which Mall attempts to dismiss Habermas's longing for a non-metaphysical universalism. Here Mall makes an affirmative appeal to an elaborate evocation of the postmodern situation *à la* Lyotard.¹ In Mall's reading of Lyotard almost all philosophising is stripped of its apparently compelling scientific validity, its smug appeal to reason is dismissed, and what is left is recognised as the basically literary format that it is:

'Even so a general rule might lead and join us, a rule which is the Lyotard's words would run thus: "Let them play ... and let us play without interference".'²

For Mall, reason, far from having one unique manifestation, has no concrete local format: the various local forms of reason that have precipitated in history are in themselves the result of a becoming, a genesis – and the same is true for the various hermeneutic models to which these local forms of reasons are subjected.³ In Mall's opinion this position is sufficient ground for his claim that

'no tradition, no place, no language, is being privileged by postmodern hermeneutics; postmodern hermeneutics is placelessly localising, or in other words, localisingly placeless, because with regard to any possible hermeneutical model it contains a warning of the dangers of absolutisation.'⁴

¹ Mall 1995: 69-77.

² Original:

'Dennoch könnte ein allgemeine Regel uns leiten und lenken, die in den Worten Lyotards heißt: "Laßt spielen... und laßt uns in Ruhe spielen".'² Mall 1995: 75; cf. Lyotard 1979.

³ Mall 1995: 77.

⁴ Original:

'Die postmoderne Hermeneutik privilegiert keine Tradition, keinen Ort, keine Sprache; sie ist ortlos orthaft oder, anders gewendet, orthaft ortlos, weil sie jedes hermeneutische Modell vor den Gefahren einer Verabsolutierung warnt.'⁴ Mall 1995: 78. This is a recurrent theme throughout Mall's work, see the titles in the bibliography of his works in Mall 1995.

However, I am of a contrary opinion. However sympathetic we may find Mall's point of view, and however much we would like it to be true, his statement is merely an apotropaic formula. It is to conceal that fact that, contrary to what Mall claims, localisation undeniably takes place in this hermeneutic process. This localisation does not necessarily take the form of any geographical domain the size of a language region or a nation state; but localisation it is, certainly in this sense that a home base is being explicitly constructed, by the philosophical interpreter, through the competent use of specialist philosophical natural language. This process, at the same time, constructs a rather small set of people (several tens of thousands, I estimate; at the most, a few hundreds of thousands) who are the philosophical initiates for whom such language use is familiar and meaningful – and who at the same time are in a position to check another philosopher's specialist language with regard to its formal and substantial impeccability.

In Mall's work, the 'placeless local' character of intercultural philosophy is complementary to other paradoxical contradictions: the contradiction between strangeness and familiarity, and especially that between 'understanding misunderstanding' or 'misunderstanding understanding'.¹ The latter paradoxical formulae sum up Mall's attractive alternative to extreme relativism – attractive nonetheless, because of its insistence on the possibility of mediation, its avoidance of total self-projective appropriation as well as avoidance of total rejection at the same time. Then, in an amazing turn, Mall even appeals to a 'universalism of a modern type' (notably: one that does away with all claims of absoluteness); he posits that such universalism points to the desirability of opening oneself up

'to the never-ending task of testifying to the fact that all human beings belong together within one possible understanding, one philosophical *sensus communis*.'²

Mall goes on to cite creatively, in support of his argument, a considerable number of hermeneutically-orientated philosophers.³ Of course,⁴ Mall's hermeneutics owes less to Heidegger and Gadamer than to more historically inclined hermeneutic philosophers, from Vico to Dilthey. This emphasis on history suggests that the distance in time, between interpreter and the historical producer of utterances to be interpreted, is fairly equivalent to the distance in space between more or less

¹ Mall 1995: 78f.

² Original:

'für die unendliche Aufgabe, die die Zusammengehörigkeit aller Menschen in einem möglichen Verstehen, in einem *sensus communis philosophicus* bezeugt'. Mall 1995: 80.

Sensus communis (or the Greek equivalent, *koinè aisthēsis*) has been an established philosophical concept since Antiquity (Aristotle, Cicero), which in early modern times especially gained ascendancy in the works of Vico (cf. Schaeffer 1990). For an intercultural philosophical exploration inspired by Kant's use of this term in *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, cf. chapter 9.

³ Mall 1995: 80-88.

⁴ Mall 1995: 80f.

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localised cultural orientations. In contradiction to Heidegger, Mall explicitly affirms that any search for a common historical source which may have been shared by European and non-Western thought¹ is beside the point, constitutes an ontological prejudice: such a common source (which would appear to deny the ‘echte Pluralität’² – ‘the genuine plurality’) cannot possibly exist, for

‘No thought is the messenger of Being itself, and no language is the original mother-tongue of Being.’³

However, instead of accepting the limitations of language-based philosophical interpretations – the fading echo of what is already a defective stammering in the first place, crude and untranslated, emulating the Language of Being of which no man is the native speaker – Mall takes refuge in the following understatements:

‘Philosophy is not immanent to language. (...) That is why translating is in itself a process, which deserves as much attention as the process of communication’.⁴

Whereas Gadamer’s concept of the merging of horizons is dismissed as ‘something mystical’,⁵ Mall fails to recognise the mystical character of his own apotropaic formula:

‘A postmodern hermeneutics has to resist the temptation of desiring one meaning out of many meanings, one culture out of many cultures, one religion out of many religions, one truth out of many truths.’⁶

Here, the irreducible, irrevocable otherness of cultures in a countable plurality is raised to the central postulate of intercultural philosophy, even though in other parts of his work he takes a relative view of cultural boundaries, as we shall see shortly. Mall merely affirms the postulate of the irreducible plurality of ‘cultures’ as self-evident and necessary, but does not offer a specific argument in support of this view. Neither does he investigate whether this postulate may perhaps owe its existence, not to any technical philosophical necessity imposed by analytical thinking, but instead

¹ As in the *Black Athena* and Afrocentrism discussions; cf. chapter 7 and section 15.10, where I affirm such common sources.

² Mall 1995: 90.

³ Original:

‘Kein Denken ist vom Sein selbst geschickt, und keine Sprache ist die eigentliche Muttersprache des Seins.’ Mall 1995: 89.

⁴ Original:

‘Philosophie ist nicht reine Sprachimmanenz. (...) Die Übersetzung ist daher selbst ein Prozeß, der ebensoviel Beachtung verdient wie der Kommunikationsprozeß.’ Mall 1995: 89.

⁵ Mall 1995: 90f.

⁶ Original:

‘Eine postmoderne Hermeneutik hat der Versuchung zu widerstehen, aus vielen Sinnen einen Sinn, aus vielen Kulturen eine Kultur, aus vielen Religionen eine Religion, aus vielen Wahrheiten eine Wahrheit zu wollen’. Mall 1995: 92.

to the political constellation of a democratic postmodern society, whose credibility and practical functioning, in our time and day, derive from the 'politics of recognition' involving vocal and strategically operating minority groups.¹ Least of all does he investigate why he himself, given his own peculiar position in the world system (born an Indian, now a German professor largely professing the Western philosophical tradition), should hold this postulate.

Recent research on wide-ranging connections in time and space in such fields as religious and ideological systems, myths, systems of knowledge, philosophies, forms of early science, board games and other formal systems,² points in exactly the opposite direction from Mall's postulate. It does so in a way that explodes the political tenets of today's globalising multicultural society – in other words, it contradicts the reification of irreducible difference between 'cultures'. If in these fields of research we encounter, everywhere, forms of proto-globalisation, then this is indicative, not necessarily of some common primal source of all systematic human knowledge in the Old World (although the archaeology of the Later Palaeolithic, in combination with comparative linguistics and genetics, hold a lot in stock for us in this respect),³ but certainly of an interconnectivity, from specific place to specific place, of chains of invention and transmission, diffusion and transformative localisation, across large stretches of space and time. In the contemporary globalising multicultural society communal identities are painstakingly compartmentalised (each compartment boasts its own boundary, identity, distinctive attributes, birthright, cultivated sensitivities – each of these features issued with their own history, or each issued with the politically correct denial of the significance of an origin). This state of affairs then appears as the recent product of a peculiar historical mode of structuring socio-political power, and therefore no longer appears – as Mall would have it – as the manifestation of an eternal dogma of redeeming difference in the history of humankind. For it is now becoming increasingly clear that for Black, Brown and White, African, Asiatic, European, and, if we care to look a little further afield, even for the Americas, Oceania and Australia, and for the myriad national and ethnic traditions within these somatic and geographical contexts, a common history and a common heritage *could possibly be constructed* to a much greater degree than would be suggested by the emphatic affirmation of a difference that is irresolvable and has to stay that way.

Mall does not enter at all into a discussion of these socio-political backgrounds of identity construction in the contemporary world. And yet he allows himself to suggest, in a remarkable balancing act, that the absolutising of difference between culturally constructed worlds is merely the hallmark of

¹ Taylor 1992.

² For a short characterisation of such research, cf. section 15.10.

³ Cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (b), (d), (e).

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‘a person locked in a naïve conception of the world.’¹

Mall’s hope continues to be inspired by

‘The readiness to communicate, which is based on a localised placelessness of a subject that is at the same time bound to the earth yet involved in a meditative-reflective hermeneutics – a subject *who believes as little in the dogma of untranslatability as in the dogma of a total incommensurability*. Such a hermeneutic subject does not have any specific language as mother tongue. Having incarnated as a localised subject implies partaking of a specific tradition and speaking a specific language. Only such a subject is in a position to avoid both a violent appropriation and a total disregard of that which is alien. This occurs while the subject is conscious of the fact that I as a concrete subject might well have been someone else. (...) [T]ranslatability, understandability and communication are regulating ideals, whose progressive realisation depends on the triumph over a prereflective, dogged naïvity. The hallmark of such naïvity is the incapability of perceiving one’s own point of view as only one among many such points of view. Realising that it is impossible to be concretely free from points of view, only comes as the result of reflection at a higher level. It is this which enables us to be tolerant vis-à-vis plurality.’²

Manifestly (as Mall’s play on words already indicates) what is involved here is a utopia, a Nowhereland, and even an elitist Nowhereland, entry to which is reserved to only a few. I cannot escape the impression that this position once again owes a lot to the way in which the author Mall has constructed his own autobiographical identity in a subjective attempt at impartiality between East and West – without being able to admit that he has only reached such a vantage point at the expense of practically giving up his Indian language, concepts, modes of expression, contexts, possibly (but unknown to us) in his personal life, but especially – to judge by his published works – in his public philosophical practice. Only someone who in the course of his life has become a professor of philosophy in a totally different language than his mother tongue, in a different continent, can dream of the ideal hermeneutic subject as being without a mother tongue. But such a dream is a form of violence inflicted upon the dreamer himself, and reflects the agonies of adaptation,

¹ Original:

‘eine in der naiven Einstellung lebende Person’. Mall 1995: 97.

² Original:

‘...die Bereitschaft zur Kommunikation, ausgehend von einer orthaften Ortlosigkeit eines erdgebundenen, aber doch meditativ-reflexiven hermeneutischen Subjekts, *das weder eine totale Übersetzbarkeit noch eine totale Inkommensurabilität zum Dogma erhebt*. Ein solches hermeneutisches Subjekt hat keine bestimmte Sprache als Muttersprache. Inkarniert als ein orthaftes Subjekt, hat es teil an einer bestimmten Tradition und spricht eine bestimmte Sprache. Nur ein solches Subjekt ist in der Lage, eine gewaltsame Aneignung oder eine völlige Vernachlässigung des Fremden zu vermeiden. Dies geschieht in dem Bewußtsein, daß ich als konkretes Subjekt hätte auch ein anderes werden können. (...) Übersetzbarkeit, Verstehbarkeit und Kommunikation sind regulative Ideale, deren schrittweise Realisation die Überwindung der präreflexiven, mundanen Naivität zur Voraussetzung hat. Das Kennzeichen einer solchen Naivität ist das Unvermögen, den eigenen Standpunkt als einen unter den vielen wahrnehmen zu können. Die Einstellung, daß es kein konkretes Freisein von Standpunkten gibt, ist ein Ergebnis einer höherstufigen Reflexion und ermöglicht uns, dem Vielfältigen gegenüber tolerant zu sein.’ Mall 1995: 92-93; my italics.

self-denial, humiliation and lost identity typical of transcontinental migrancy. It is another form of 'becoming a *sangoma*'.

Mall then returns to Habermas and shows how the latter's views on communication are based on the assumption that a fundamental unity of reason, and a formal convergence of conceptions of rationality, of truth and of justice, underlie all languages. Mall has little difficulty exposing Habermas's views on this point as another version of the theory of universal grammar. Although this does not prevent Mall from borrowing selectively from Habermas, Mall rightly doubts – with the later Wittgenstein and the postmodern philosophy of language¹ – whether we are dealing here primarily with givens in language and through language.

But I would go even further.

In the first place a self-reflexive moment needs to be built into our approach to intercultural hermeneutics. This would allow us to remember once more that intercultural hermeneutics in an academic context would usually be language-based, and to that extent would be incapable of liberating itself from the limitations of an othering and subordinating, appropriating stammering as discussed above. Language's shortcomings for inter-language understanding cannot be made good within language, not even by (language-based) self-criticism after the fact. The language-based hermeneutic operation is to fundamentally fail, precisely if it is justified on paper.

In the second place (and here we are back with Habermas, with his vision of communicative action), the philosopher attributes to himself a privileged position with regard to intercultural hermeneutics. This is probably totally unfounded, not only because of the general discrediting, in contemporary philosophy, of the idea of a privileged vantage point or meta-position, but also and especially because of the philosopher's entrenchment in formalised language. Of all human products, language is the most subtly and intolerantly structured – allow the pronunciation of one phoneme to fall just outside the range of tolerance, and an entire word, even a sentence, becomes unintelligible; put the intonation slightly differently, commit a minor grammatical error, and an entire sentence is rendered unintelligible, erroneous, ridiculous, or at least obtains a totally different meaning. *Because* of this excessive regulation, competent language use is the touchstone *par excellence* of whether a person has had prolonged and early exposure to effective socialisation as a member of a peculiar linguistic group, which often coincides with a particular ethnic identity:² for practically no non-native speaker ever succeeds in speaking totally accentlessly and idiomatically any language acquired later in life. This means that of all human products language is the *least* suitable as a medium of intercultural communication, and the *least* reliable as a criterium of whether such intercultural

¹ In this connection we may mention Derrida 1967a, 1967b, 1988; Rorty's thesis of absolute contextualism is rejected by Mall as being too much of a Western thing, and as an absolutisation of Rorty's own relativistic point of view.

² Van Binsbergen 1992a = 1994c.

communication has in fact been established. There are numerous forms in which the negotiation, full of mutual compromises, between various forms of initially unaccommodated otherness may evolve better and more effectively, may more easily adopt intermediate forms, may more easily be learned and adjusted, than by means of language. We ought to remove language somewhat from the centre of intercultural communication. Defective language-based communication coupled to far more competent non-language-based actions – the latter structured around clothing, gestures, images, material attributes and objects (especially industrial artefacts): this is the practice of the globalised world, in pop culture, on sports fields, at the Internet, during vacations, in the streets, in the pubs, in urban neighbourhoods, at the counter of formal bureaucratic institutions, in the doctor's surgery, and even in bed. Hence, to my mind, the most characteristic situations of intercultural exchange are not those of philosophical or ethnographic textual hermeneutics. Instead, I would suggest as more likely instances of effective intercultural communication: trade transactions of all sorts of degrees of formality and informality, and often carried in the medium of only partially known *linguae francae*; the clumsy intercourse (in the social sense, but without necessarily excluding the narrower sexual sense) with strangers with whom one can only exchange a handful of words – such as has become common experience in the globalising society; and even the concrete practice of anthropological fieldwork (which is far more often undertaken with very defective linguistic competence than most non-anthropologists realise – the anthropological professional myth of adequate language mastery has been accepted too easily). In these kinds of intercultural situations we see a genuine, albeit still only very partial, fusion of publicly constructed identities on a world scale. Such fusion is the real hallmark of contemporary globalisation. In this light, Mall's insistence on cultural boundaries and cultural distinctness (even if accompanied by perfunctory protestations to the contrary) makes an obsolete and rigid impression.

Now when Mall summarises the three main points of his hermeneutics, we encounter – besides the rejection of the idea of one universal world philosophy, and insistence on the need for any comparative philosophy to be impartial – the following trait:

‘In the field of interculturality, intercultural hermeneutics emphatically rejects the many explicit and implicit forms of enculturation [and] acculturation, and instead advocates some kind of interculturalisation, that does not feel threatened by the existence of a plurality of cultures. Such intercultural hermeneutics stresses not only the stressful parallel coexistence of cultures, but also the significant contributions that they may yet make to one another. Precondition of interculturalisation is the conviction – the intercultural postulate – that cultures can be explained to one another.’¹

¹ Original:

‘Auf dem Felde der Interkulturalität weist die interkulturelle Hermeneutik mit Nachdruck die vielen expliziten und impliziten Formen der Inkulturation, der Akkulturation zurück und plädiert für eine Art Interkulturalisation, die die Existenz der vielen Kulturen nicht als eine Bedrohung empfindet. Sie betont nicht nur das spannungsvolle Nebeneinander, sondern ein Füreinander der Kulturen. Zum Begriff der

'The existence of the many cultures', not as a threat, says Mall, but as a precondition for interculturality. In other words, the existence of distinct, bounded 'cultures' is required before we can speak of interactions between these 'cultures'; but such interactions are essentially non-problematic, because 'cultures can be explained to one another'. My own position, as developed throughout this book, is diametrically opposed to Mall's: in the modern world, 'cultures do not exist', I hold. What, however, does exist are numerous cultural orientations, shared with some or many other people, and which in each person's life and in each situation intersect and interact. But they do so in a problematic way: all such interaction is wrought with power relations tending to hegemony; the hermeneutics of otherness is inherently appropriative and distorting, and yet human cultural history is informed by a common search for truth and a common epistemology.¹

But even as we differ, let us respectfully realise from what background of personal enculturation or acculturation – from what personal involvement in the globalisation process, as an Indian-born German professor, Mall speaks here – even though he implicitly denies that background. And let us realise that Mall's own personal situation and biography testifies, not to the detached, possibly conflictive, parallel co-existence side by side of distinct cultures (more or less as books attributed to a specific 'culture' tend to be placed side by side in a library for comparative philosophy). The essence of Mall's situation as an exemplary globalised person in the modern world lies in the paradoxical interplay between

- (a) the strategically confronting construction of performative cultural diversity, in which people selectively and transformingly draw from a number of local cultural orientations that, however, seldom occur in pure and distinct form;
- (b) the fact that in many respects people the world over share in a worldwide society producing more and more similar environments and similar experiences at many different places (for instance watching the same movie or wearing similar jeans in five different continents), due to the increasing globalisation of production, distribution, and formal organisations (such as the state, education, health services, media, multinational enterprises).

12.5. Conclusion

Let us conclude here our exploration of the possibility of approaching the problem of 'intercultural' knowledge, under contemporary conditions of globalisation, from the point of view of a specific intercultural hermeneutics. In fact, Mall turns away from the messy situations of interculturality that are typical of globalisation. His

Interkulturation gehört die Überzeugung von der Hermeneutik als einem interkulturellen Postulat.' Mall 1995: 99. Mall's concentrated use of technical language necessitated a considerable freedom of my English rendering.

¹ Cf. especially the Introduction and chapters 7 and 15.

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entrenchment in language and his balancing act of paradoxes make us suspicious of the limitations of all intercultural hermeneutics in the hands of philosophers. Nonetheless, his struggle with the problem proves inspiring. A sustained but sympathetic critique of his position may yet indicate the direction along which the problem of intercultural understanding may be reduced to more practical and partly resolvable proportions.

ICT and intercultural philosophy

An African exploration

13.1. Introduction: Two worlds?

Until well into the 1970s, when terminals were scarce and the microcomputer unknown, academic computer utilisation in the Netherlands mainly took place on main frames that today we would consider hopelessly antiquated. Usually we ran our jobs at night, in our absence, for the computer was slow and the queues of rival jobs were virtually endless. The supreme moment came the next morning when we grabbed our batch of output from the counter assistant who administered the printer to which we had no direct access. The output consisted of enormous quantities of A3 fanfold paper full of barely legible printed lines of 80 characters in caps. Walking away from the counter, we would hold the wide and hopefully heavy batch of output eye-high, and with pounding heart would start to skip through the output to see if the computer had brought us the outcomes we had hoped for.

Ten years later, when in the mangrove woods of the West African country Guinea-Bissau I did cultural anthropological research into the psychotherapeutic practices of local oracular priests, I was struck time and again by the similarity between our tense and hopeful scrutiny of the computer output back in the 1970s, and the stance that these priests (often practising in groups of two or three at the time) adopted when administering the frequently resorted to chick oracle. In local Manjak society¹ sacrifices to spirits and ancestors were the order of the day. For each sacrifice its acceptance had to be ascertained by a one-bit decision device: in a swift movement the belly of a chick was cut open, and while the unexpectedly long, cream-coloured string of guts was held high in the sunlight, it was scrutinised for minutes during which the professional consultation between the priestly colleagues would decide on the presence or absence of unnatural darker stains on the outside of the guts. The outcome could be *black* (unfavourable) or *white* (favourable). The priests would wear no outward signs of their professional status, but they stood out

¹ Crowley 1990; Van Binsbergen 1984b, 1988b.

unmistakably as servants of the supernatural – privileged with extraordinary power and knowledge – by the combination of their tense technical attention; their fond deliberation on details absolutely invisible to lay outsiders; their relentless and triumphant final judgement that for the client held the greatest possible significance (for they were supervising sacrifices, no Manjak will sacrifice unless driven by despair, and each sacrifice involves very great costs of time, money and frustration); and the studied neglect with which the disfigured dead animal was cast away.

The choice of these two opening vignettes, one Dutch and one African, purposely conjures up the compartmentalised world image from which I want to take a distance in this chapter. ‘Africa’, ‘Europe’, ‘the North Atlantic region’ – these are not neutral descriptive categories and certainly not distinctions underpinned by scientific analysis, but merely geopolitical programmes, serving to designate the hegemonic relationships in the contemporary world:

- The North Atlantic region as characterised by material technology in which the interaction between man and machine (i.e. a conglomerate of highly heterogeneous material part objects, functioning on the basis of a rationally composed, and empirically underpinned coherent complexity) entails, in addition to social effects, an interference with nature that is explicitly intended as well as demonstrably effective, and that may be conducive to some social utilisation of natural forces.
- Africa as characterised by socio-ritual technology (‘magic’) in which machines in the above sense do not feature, and in which man only produces a social effect by merely *the illusion* of an interference with nature, through interaction with objects that are either naturally given (the chick), or that may be produced with the aid of a simple technology (the priest’s knife slitting open the chick’s belly).

According to such a conception of the world, ICT (i.e. ‘Information and Communication Technology’), as eminently typical of the technology of North Atlantic modernism and postmodernism, would be alien to Africa. Accordingly, it would – allegedly – merely do violence to African people if material technology were to occupy just as much of a central and taken-for-granted part of their lives as has come to be the case in the North. By such a postulated development, the most beautiful, most essential contribution of Africans to the global achievements of humankind would – still allegedly – be destroyed, given the constraints imposed by this world view. But this would be very unlikely to happen anyway for, because of their own ‘culture’, ‘Africans’ would (so this conception of the world maintains) be scarcely capable of developing the various specific skills necessary for contemporary computer use In accordance with the essentialism characteristic of geopolitical constructions, the division of labour between North and South is conceived of as perennial and immutable: to us the computer, to them the chick oracle – as presumably it has been since the beginning of time, hasn’t it, or certainly since the late nineteenth century, when British colonial expansion in Africa took place to the

tune of the following couplet, that in its emphasis on the Northern monopolisation of the technical achievements of that time and age (including advanced weaponry) implies the essence of a not-yet-globalised world:

Whatever happens,
we have got
the Maxim gun
and they have not.

One of the principal tasks of intercultural philosophy is to explode precisely this world view, and to replace it by a model more in accordance with the contemporary global reality – that is characterised by immense diversity, the international interconnectedness of cultural orientations, and the virtually unlimited global availability of state-of-the-art technologies.

13.2. The problem as seen from the perspective of intercultural philosophy

Intercultural philosophy investigates, as its central theme, *interculturality*.¹ It does so by means of a theoretical reflection on such concepts as culture, cultural difference, cultural diversity, cultural relativism, identity, multiculturalism, power, hermeneutics, dialogue. With the use of such concepts, intercultural philosophy critically explores the conditions under which we might speak of interculturality. What are the units between which the interaction takes place that is presupposed in the concept of ‘*inter*’-culturality? On what grounds (and are these valid grounds?) do we distinguish between such units? What nature, permanence, boundedness vis-à-vis each other, internal structure, internal consistence, can we attribute to these units? Is it meaningful to speak of a plurality of cultures (in line with well-established contemporary language use) in such a way that we attribute to each culture out of which that plurality consists, such features as internal integration, boundedness vis-à-vis other such cultures, association with a specific part set of humanity, and association with a part of the earth’s surface as the historical habitat of that part set? Or is such a use of ‘culture’ and ‘cultures’ too much a reflection of such self-evidences as have established themselves in the socio-political structure of contemporary society – self-evidences which the philosopher ought to critique rather than take for granted. Is it meaningful to speak of an African ‘culture’ or ‘cultures’, and to attribute distinctive features to it or to them? The world of humankind appears to our experience as a complex of contradictions, foremost among which is the contradiction between existing inequalities in terms of power and resources, on the one hand, and the appeal to a shared humanity regardless of these inequalities, on the other hand. What is the relationship between

¹ Cf. Mall 1995; Mall & Lohmar 1993; Kimmerle 1994b; Kimmerle & Wimmer 1997; the present book, chapter 15 and *passim*.

- (a) such underlying inequalities, and
- (b) thinking in terms of culture and cultural differences?

Is (b) simply the masked, oblique expression of (a)? Are intercultural knowledge and intercultural communication possible? Or will such knowledge always remain invalid, to the extent to which it is incapable of escaping from the distorting effects produced by the hegemonic subjugation of one subset of humanity to the language, power, productive interests, world view, values of another such subset? Is it possible for cultural mobilisation initiated by the local actors themselves, and by philosophical reflection by intercultural philosophers, to rise above these limitations? Can such mobilisation and reflection even be a means to redress inequalities and to enhance the validity of intercultural knowledge? These are some of the themes of intercultural philosophy.

With specific application to ICT this yields two central questions:

- (1) Is ICT to be viewed as the specific and characteristic achievement of only a subset of humanity (notably the North Atlantic part), and
- (2) Is ICT therefore not really at home in Africa?

I will answer these questions in largely a negative sense. This allows us to situate Africa within a globalising world, and to admit that in that context Africa has unmistakably and self-evidently access to essentially metalocal elements such as ICT; next we can pose the more empirical question (3) as to how such access takes shape in concrete terms, in other words, how the enculturation of ICT in Africa manifests itself by means of a transformative localisation – often a virtualisation – of whatever is available worldwide in the ICT field.

13.3. ICT as North Atlantic and therefore as not really at home in Africa?

Several African philosophers have occupied themselves with the question of the retention or the loss of cultural identity under conditions of contemporary information and communication technology. Does electronic ICT in Africa lead to creative and liberating cultural appropriation by Africans? Does it lead to the annihilation of the African cultural heritage? Or do both propositions apply somehow? Is the computer in Africa to be taken for granted or does it remain an alien element? Already quite early¹ the prominent political philosopher Ali Mazrui (hailing from Kenya, now at the State University of New York, USA) regarded the computer as a ‘cultural transplant’ from the North, alien to the societies and cultures

¹ Mazrui 1978, cf. 1977.

of Africa and only capable of having a devastating or subjugating effect in the African context. Jules-Rosette summarises Mazrui's view in the following terms:

'[the] imported nature [of the computer] might badly fit the tasks and orientation of non-western workers, and as a result it may form a source of socio-cultural disruption, increasing economic dependency and introducing modes of thought which are alien to the working environment in which the computer is being used.'¹

Mazrui was recently supported in this point of view by the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye, who stated that:

'Ideally, technology, as a cultural product, should rise from the culture of a people, if it is to be directly accessible to a large section of the population and its nuances are to be fully appreciated by them.'²

But by contrast Paulin Hountondji from the Ivory Coast takes a relativising distance from any attempt at claiming an absolute distinct African identity and culture, including an African philosophy. He invites his African colleagues to recognise the fact that contemporary African expressions are increasingly linked up with a global cultural, philosophical and technological mainstream. Here Africans, provided the intercontinental inequalities attending the material conditions for the production of knowledge are lifted and on the basis of the African historical background of what Hountondji calls 'endogenous knowledge production', may very well prove able to make a contribution, which then is to converge with, rather than deviate from, worldwide accepted formats and achievements.³ For Hountondji, ICT is the answer to Africa's problem in lagging behind in academic knowledge production. The African Institute for Advanced Study that Hountondji is now in the process of creating in Benin, is based on Princeton's model (and that of Wassenaar's, the Netherlands), and will hinge on electronic ICT, not on such stereotypically African but obsolescent forms of communication as the talking drum and the palaver.⁴

The open debate on these questions is severely impeded by the fact that such debate is situated in global and national arenas, where social control favours the public production of politically correct statements, or of statements that reflect the parochial collective interests of a particular group of participants in this debate. Many philosophical positions on the issue of the transcontinental reception of ICT are possible, and among them are socially privileged geopolitical points of view, entrenched by the effects of societal power distribution, ideology, and media coverage; the latter points of view may have become installed in the collective representations of large sets of people in such a way that these viewpoints can hardly be explicitly discussed and confronted any more without prejudice or without inviting bitter controversy. These collective representations also tend to invade the

¹ Jules-Rosette 1990.

² Gyekye 1997a.

³ Cf. Hountondji 1996, 1988, 1990, 1994.

⁴ Hountondji, personal communications, 1997-1998.

philosophical discourse, to the extent to which philosophers, too, are children of their time and of their wider society.¹ The naïve geopolitics of everyday North Atlantic parlance, such as the evocation of a particularly negative othering of African conditions and people, is often replicated in what are otherwise sophisticated philosophical specialist arguments.

Let us seek to sketch, by means of a few rough distinctions, the fields of tension that are encountered here.

In the times of mercantilism, imperialism and colonialism, ‘the African’ was constructed, in North Atlantic thought, as *the other par excellence* – an other to whom the philosophical achievements of the Modern Age (insights in the human conditions, and such human rights as derived from such insights), scarcely applied, even though Europeans insistently claimed these insights and rights for themselves. Subsequently, after decolonisation, the second half of the twentieth century CE has witnessed two almost opposite movements seeking to redress – with the mobilisation of a good deal of emotion – this racist exclusion of Africans:

- (a) *Universalism*. On the one hand, in a modernist Enlightenment-derived frame of mind, and largely in the context of development co-operation and Africanist social science, and their underlying epistemologies, there is the attempt to subsume things African under the headings of allegedly universally applicable, and originally North Atlantic, categories (world religion, democratic constitutional arrangements, modern health care, formal education, in general the formal organisation as the dominant format for social and economic life, and moreover modern technology, economic planning, literature, philosophy, art).
- (b) *Particularism*. On the other hand, there is the particularism projected onto fragmented African identities as an aspect of the ethnicisation process in which (under postmodern conditions such as the erosion of the modernist world view of the Enlightenment, of the centralist nation state, and of the illusion of the autonomous subject) the contemporary world as a whole is involved; this process consists of the fact that politics is no longer primarily experienced as a struggle for scarce material resources, but for public recognition of a particularistic group identity; once such recognition has been extended to the group, it will successfully claim material resources as a matter of course.

From the perspective of movement (a), things African dissolve as a slight ruffle amidst so many others within the great flow of world culture and world history. Movement (b) however battles against such a blurring of distinctions, and stresses the construction and presentation of an identity of one’s own at the local, regional, national and continental level. The tension between these two movements produces a torsion that lends confusing double binds to much of the contemporary thinking about Africa, North Atlantic hegemony, and universality. From the ethnicising

¹ Cf. chapter 15.

perspective (b), African identity appears as the emphatic politicised condition for participation in intercontinental processes of communication, knowledge production, co-operation, intervention. From the development perspective (a), however, African specificity has been underplayed in favour of universalism in science, economics, and in social-organisational and constitutional matters. These two simultaneous movements (a) and (b) lead each to a different appreciation of such cultural programming as structures everyday life, political organisation, forms of production, world views and religious practices. According to movement (a), each cultural ordering (even if recognised to be unmistakable, comprehensive and difficult to escape from) is yet a more or less ephemeral, superficial orientation under which more fundamental intercultural communalities lurk – communalities that are claimed to be universal but that in fact are conceived primarily in accordance with North Atlantic models. This view implies the possibility that a specific ‘culture’ does not produce a total experience encompassing an individual’s entire life, and therefore also implies the probability that each individual is simultaneously involved in a plurality of different cultural orientations; hence it would not be meaningful to speak of ‘a culture’ or of ‘cultures’ in the sense of integrated, bounded, distinct human modes of being that encompass life as a whole and that are shared by large sets of people.¹ The surface fragmentation of ‘cultures’ would be taken to dissolve into comprehensive spatial and temporal communalities and continuities at a deeper level. By contrast, the ethnicisation movement (b) invites us to let the many concrete cultural orderings coincide more unequivocally with the identities that we construct for ourselves within contemporary political arenas, and to attribute to these orderings, in this context, a permanence and a discrete distinctive nature that are commensurate with the severity of the contradictions and with the seriousness of the struggle within these arenas. The South identity or identities, from a development perspective (a), would ultimately appear to be contingent and unessential, yet from the ethnicisation perspective (b) would appear to be reified and essentialised. Since the greatest, most conspicuous inequality in our time is that between North and South on a global level, from the ethnicisation perspective (b) it would amount to a treacherous attack on the most important resources available for improving the conditions and enhancing the empowerment of people in the South, if as under (a) one were to take a relative view of any Southern, for instance any African, identity. Thus perspectives (a) and (b) lead to utterly contradictory positions, neither of which could be said to be more justified than the other. *Interculturality is invariably characterised by the puzzle of contradicting positions between which we cannot choose* unless we would be prepared to destroy the equality of these positions and forfeit interculturality for the sake of a one-sided alternative of hegemony, subjugation, objectification, ethnocentrism.

¹ Cf. chapter 15.

This goes some way towards sketching the complex context in which we may explore, from intercultural perspective, the strained relationship between, on the one hand, 'Africa' (i.e. African identity), and contemporary ICT, on the other.

We have to admit that 'Africa' is not a fixed and firm reality. When Mazrui and Gyekye see 'Africa' as being penetrated by the computer, then their concern is not so much with a land mass that extends between certain latitudes and longitudes, one on which hundreds of millions of people move in a gaudy interplay of cultural and social organisational varieties – partially rural and in accordance with historically specific local patterns, partially urban and increasingly in accordance with patterns that are either recent local innovations, or transformed borrowings from elsewhere in the contemporary world. In the debate around ICT, 'Africa' is primarily an identity construct: the issue is 'African culture' or 'African cultures', that are alleged to be negatively influenced by the allegedly alien computer and the latter's capabilities of communication and information.

To what might such a possibly negative influence be attributed? Here at least three answers would be possible:

- (1) (1') ICT is Northern culture, and hence (1'') ICT is irreconcilably opposed to African culture;
- (2) (2') ICT is metalocal world culture, without local specificity and local validity, and hence (2'') ICT is, in principle, devastating for any localising cultural identity such as the African one;
- (3) (3') ICT is inimical to culture, and hence (3'') ICT is inimical to the African culture or cultures.

At first glance something could be said in favour of each of these three theses, but none can entirely pass the test of closer scrutiny. This is partially due to the dual nature of each of these theses: each starts with a global cultural appraisal of ICT, followed by a claimed effect of the global characteristic on the African situation. Even if either of the two parts were true, their combination might still be false.

13.4. ICT inimical to any culture?

Only in the case of thesis (3) the derivation of (3'') from (3') is evident: whatever is inimical to culture, is inevitably inimical to African culture or cultures. Technological pessimism has been part of the recent continental philosophical mainstream; its principal exponent has been Heidegger,¹ who, moreover, claimed that technology is by its essence perpendicular to any culture, does not constitute an integrated part of it. But even so, thesis (3) can hardly be defended. Whatever definition we offer of culture, in continuity with widespread established language usage, we are likely to prefer to describe culture as that which has a collective nature – in other words, that

¹ Heidegger 1977.

which is the attribute of a set of people, of a subset of total humanity. Moreover, our definition is likely to include an aspect of spatial extension, since even the smallest set of people inevitably occupies a certain space. As concerns the time dimension, our concept of culture is likely to include a certain permanence, supported by interpersonal learning processes to bridge the gap between generations, and to guarantee cultural continuity in the face of the individual mortality of a culture's human bearers. In other words, culture is likely to be considered as being subjected to processes of regulated transfer between people whose cultural competence was initially unequal: people belonging to different generations, classes, genders, linguistic groups, local outsiders versus local insiders, etc. And our definition of culture is also likely to include an aspect of recognisable patterned ordering that allows culture both to be specifically recognised as a transferable collective attribute and to be actually transferred to those who adopt patterned cultural specifics as their distinctive collective attribute.

Information and communication are implied in most of these aspects of our definition of culture. Information and communication are thus essential aspects of culture, and they always take place via a specific medium – a specific technology. The face-to-face communication¹ by which culture is predominantly transferred in family settings constitutes a technology of speech and rhetorics, – in other words a technology of information and communication. Another such technology of information and communication is formed – ever since the earliest imperial times of the Assyrians, Persians, Chinese and Romans – by the technologies of the mail road with its shunting points where horses and couriers were replaced, etc., or in the last thousand years (if we go by the Chinese invention of block printing, rather than by the more recent West European variety of detached type) the technology of printing, and in the most recent times the technologies of movies, radio, television, video, and the Internet. These have all amounted to technologies of information and communication constitutive of culture. Instead of being inimical to culture, ICT constitutes a central element in everything we would prefer to call culture. There seems to be little reason to exclude present-day, electronic ICT from this general picture.

However, we must point out the tension between

- (i) on the one hand, the ethnicisation perspective on culture (according to which culture is bounded, specific, integrated, and comprises and defines specific part sets of humanity), and, on the other hand, in a universalist vein,
- (ii) communication as a fundamental aspect of *any* culture.

¹ Although even here the role of non-spoken representations – in sacred emblems, images, writing, photographs, videos, e-mail, telephone conversations, etc. – must not be underestimated or restricted to the most recent times.

The former (i) is conducive to demarcation, the latter (ii) is conducive to extension which in principle may be unlimited, may comprise the entire world of humankind. In other words, the communication which is constitutive of culture may spill over beyond that one culture and thus assault the specificity of that culture. The fact that language is one of the principal means of communication for constituting culture works to the advantage of demarcation: language is highly structured and specific, in terms of its lexicon, phonology and syntax; there is a great variety of languages; languages are in principle not mutually intelligible, and therefore each specific language effectively limits the part set of humanity and¹ the spatial radius within which communication takes place and culture consolidates itself. Not for nothing is language the main stable indicator of ethnic identity and is it a major factor in determining a localised gene pool.² But even language is acquired, mainly³ by a learning process, many (probably most) people in the world are multilingual to a greater or lesser extent, and therefore it is very well possible to step out of the limitations imposed by merely one language. Moreover, language is by no means the only method of communication, by no means the only factor constituting the communication element in culture. One example may make this clear. Whoever makes a transcontinental trip across Africa in an old motorcar will everywhere on that continent meet people with whom one can barely converse, if at all, but who are able to repair one's car should the need arise; obviously the communication about that type of technological knowledge (and many other types of knowledge) is language-dependent only to a very limited extent. *Through communication processes culture is both consolidated, and continually spread outside the space that was initially defined as that culture's proper domain. Moreover, by communication processes culture is continually invaded from outside the proper domain it has initially claimed for itself.* As a result, the localisation of culture and the close link between culture and identity in the process of ethnicisation tend to be continually threatened and destroyed. On these grounds one might argue that ICT is both constitutive of, and inimical to, culture, but one might as well maintain that the very conception of culture as localised, bounded, identitary, is inimical to culture!

Exit thesis (3).

¹ To the – presently rapidly decreasing – extent to which languages are neatly distributed across the globe in the way of geographical language areas, each of which is tied to a specific section of the earth's surface.

² Dupanloup de Ceuninck *et al.* 2000; cf. Renfrew 1991; Cavalli-Sforza 1997; Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994.

³ Most anthropologists would claim language mastery to derive *exclusively* from a learning process; however, from various sides reasons have been advanced to qualify this statement, from Chomsky (1968, 1986) postulating the innate nature of language ability, to Sheldrake (1981, 1988) postulating that acquisition of an unknown language would be made easier the more speakers that language already has – as if an intangible supporting network – a 'morphogenetic field' – would add to individual learning achievements.

13.5. ICT as Northern culture

Thesis (1) is considered to be true by the early Mazrui, and by Gyekye. Our example of African car repairs is doubly instructive, for it also shows that many forms of cultural programming (such as knowledge of transport technology, specifically of the internal combustion engine), that we would initially be inclined to situate in a particular area of the contemporary world (notably in the North Atlantic region), have not confined themselves to that part, and have in fact gained worldwide distribution. Not only the silly clichés of globalisation, such as jeans, Coca Cola and the McDonald hamburger, but also other globally trendy styles of clothing, of cosmetics and bodily hygiene, means of transport, organisational forms, world religions, and globally circulating forms of time reckoning, of music and its reproduction, of dance, recreation, sports and sexuality, have gained an absolutely metalocal distribution. Africa takes part in this distribution, not so much because Africans can afford actual consumption out of this global supply (most of them cannot), but vicariously: to the extent to which representations of this metalocal culture, via TV, video, radio, the printed press, and people's own observation across class boundaries, have reached contemporary Africans and informs their desires. Africans today seek to partake of *Modernity on a Shoestring*.¹ All this amounts to the cultural aspects of globalisation. By globalisation we mean, in general, the process through which local contexts in the world more and more dissolve into a worldwide network of interaction, under the influence of technological innovations that have reduced to virtually zero the costs (in terms of time and money) of communication and information. Globalisation was, in the first instance, observed with regard to transnational movements of capital along electronic media, but in the meantime turns out to have important cultural dimensions.²

In this situation, to appeal to 'African culture' or 'African cultures' implies the risk that we dissimulate the problematic, constructed, virtual nature of these concepts. One of the main themes of the contemporary African experience has been the revival, often even the militant reconstruction, of the 'authentically African' despite, and often with the aid of, prominently installed metalocal contemporary technologies: the printing press, music, recordings, film, radio and television, the Internet, cultural festivals with electronic sound technologies. There is no empirical support for the claim that historical African culture may still be captured, *entirely intact and self-evident*, anywhere on the African continent today, by whatever means. Whatever passes for African culture today has become to a lesser or greater degree *virtual*: in name it harks back to historical cultural materials (world views, norms and values, religious symbols, institutions deriving from the local past), but in fact it appears in contemporary representations as fragmented, as performatively and

¹ Cf. Fardon *et al.* 1999.

² A selection from the rapidly growing literature in this field: Bauman 1998; Beyer 1994; Featherstone 1995; Friedman 1995; Hannerz 1992b; King 1991; Meyer & Geschiere 1998; Robertson 1992; van der Veer 1996; Warnier 1999; cf. van Binsbergen 1999e, the English version of which appears as chapter 12.

deliberately produced under a new globally influenced format, and as having lost its coherence with a more integrated and persistent local cultural framework: it has become redefined and hangs up in the air.¹

In this context, to speak of ICT as a cultural transplant is misleading to the highest degree. For such a claim denies the continuity between North Atlantic and African manifestations of globalised metalocal culture, and suggests instead – in a nostalgic re-enactment of the redeeming mysticism of things African – a geopolitical separateness between continents in the cultural domain, and in general a purity and authenticity of cultural domains, which in our time and age is certainly nowhere to be found; and then I reserve for another argument the question whether such purity and separateness *at any moment in the past* would have been adequate terms to describe the actual situation within Africa and the relationship between Africa and the North Atlantic region. The fact that Mazrui and Gyekye pursue cosmopolitan forms of knowledge production (philosophy, political science) in an originally European language (English), and that they do so effectively and with great success and appeal especially outside their African country of origin, is in itself sufficient proof of the point I wish to make here with regard to the present lack of separation and lack of purity.

Would it even be anachronistic to claim, in our time and age, a specific local or regional origin and identity (for example ‘North Atlantic’, ‘American’, ‘European’) for technologies that at present have a metalocal distribution, including electronic ICT?

It is characteristic of modern times that technological innovation has expressly become an industry, a collective, explicit and rationally organised production process. Technology has (not entirely unlike what Heidegger claimed to be the case) loosened itself from more comprehensive socio-cultural frameworks that have produced it, and already for a long time has largely ceased to be an expression of the local socio-cultural forms which such frameworks have assumed. In other words, apart from minor and immaterial embellishments, there is nothing remarkably Dutch any more about Philips (‘the inventors of CD’, as their advertising slogan claims) CD equipment, nothing remarkably American about Macintosh computers, nothing remarkably Japanese about Fuji cameras. Patent law regulates the appropriation of forms of technology that generate so much productivity and on which products for such lucrative markets are based, that restrictions on the circulation of that type of knowledge are worth enforcing, at least for the immediate future. Of course, these restrictions on the circulation of knowledge only serve to ensure the greatest possible circulation, with the greatest possible profit, of the products made on the basis of that knowledge – in line with the general trend of globalisation.

The spatial imagery surrounding innovation is often deceptive. Typically, innovation tends to be imagined as coming from the outside, from a different domain than one’s own, even if in fact that origin is far more continuous with one’s own

¹ Van Binsbergen 1997f, 1998a.

domain. For the Dutch farmer who has taken to monitoring his cattle by computer, this is a 'town' technology, initially alien to his own rural environment; but his very appropriation of this technology, as of so many others, has already rendered relative the entire contradiction between town and country. For the Dutch academic who in the last fifteen years has totally transformed her style of writing, research and teaching for the sake of the microcomputer and the Internet, the latter may have appeared as an alien 'American' technology, but again this very appropriation renders relative the distinction between the European home and the no-longer-far-away USA.

But is there any way of denying that the computer is originally North Atlantic? Some readers may know that the Internet was originally a specifically American military innovation, in the 1960s, long before the advent of the microcomputer. The computer in general undoubtedly originated in specific accumulative cultural achievements of North Atlantic culture. The computer testifies to this state of affairs in many ways: in its internal design; in its external design and aesthetics; in the principles according to which the user interface has been conceived to readily appeal to the most likely, North Atlantic users; in the iconography and syntax informing the communication between computer and user, and between users; in the illusion of an absolutely individual autonomy in ownership, access, financial and legal responsibility of the owner – whereas in reality that user tends to be blindly dependent on systems that are inaccessible as black boxes and that owe no accountability to anyone; the Microsoft empire and the negative stereotyping it generates among the more conscious users is a case in point. Even the built-in conflicts, ironies and humour in the computer domain may probably be relegated to the specific types of cultural programming attending the scientific, technological, military and entrepreneurial milieus – strongly North Atlantic, predominantly USA – in which this technology has realised its rapid development. The language aspects of the computer are in the first instance American English. And without the inventive mathematics of Von Neumann, Turing and the members of their generation from the North Atlantic region, there would have been no computer.

Does this mean that the computer and ICT in general are eminently at home in the North Atlantic world? That is admittedly where they have been received for years with great rapidity in all kinds of successive phases of their innovation. But the fact of this *reception* in itself already shows that, even in the North Atlantic world, computers are not in the first place at home – the environment in which they originated is scarcely the standard North Atlantic environment, but something far more limited and specific. The most adequate description of this process of reception may be one in terms of globalisation, for instance in the following terms:

Older formations of culture were made possible by older technologies of communication and information technology (from the foot path and the talking drum to writing, the mail coach and the sailing ship); at the same time these older cultural formations were breached by communication spilling over (by virtue of the same older technologies of communication and information) outside the localising frames

of identity. This double effect of both constituting culture and spilling over beyond the boundaries of cultural specificity has been a general feature of technologies of information and communication. Also, in the technologies of the computer (and of ICT in general), the local specificity of a cultural orientation has transcended itself by creating a medium that by its very nature is communicative and informative, and that is so even to a far greater extent than the older technologies by which older socio-cultural formations were supported. Far from being anathema to culture, contemporary ICT displays the typical dramatic relation vis-à-vis culture that technology has always had: facilitating and destructive at the same time.

Electronic ICT may, on the one hand, be a product of Northern culture, but, on the other hand, it puts paid to this very type of localised culture; it is capable of supporting historical cultural identity constructions and is admittedly used for that purpose,¹ but of far greater significance is its capability of breaching through identity boundaries, and to render thinkable, and to support, new forms of identity (like communities of e-mailers, electronic discussion groups, etc.) which are exclusively based on ICT. This new medium has turned out to be communicative and informative, and thus it claims its place among the instruments, not for the destruction, but for the perpetuation of culture.

Even if it were only for this metalocal nature inherent in electronic ICT, the computer in Africa cannot justifiably be called a North Atlantic cultural transplant – for its North Atlantic nature has been too much transcended to make ‘North Atlantic’ a fitting characterisation any longer. Moreover, as we have seen, the globalising metalocal domain extends to include contemporary Africa, where the ‘authentically African culture/cultures’ have at best survived, if at all, in the form of carefully maintained virtual enclaves, geared to the annual production of a harvest festival, a chief’s ceremony, a dancing performance, all of which have been partially reshaped in accordance with global models of media production, and thus have been virtualised.² Whoever takes an overview of contemporary socio-cultural life in Africa cannot escape the conclusion that in most places globalised elements are present and are even taken for granted, are no longer seen as alien but have been successfully appropriated in order to end up as local and indispensable albeit they may still stand out as sources of prestige. Nowhere in Africa do the jeans, the bra, the motorcar, canned food, formal organisations in education, health services, religion, give rise to surprise anymore – they demonstrate that in many respects life in Africa has ceased to be ‘African’ but – just like life in western Europe – has become metalocal, not to say global. In many respects, but not totally so. African Christian churches turn out to play a major role in filtering the market supply of modern consumption items, and in selectively validating and rejecting these: accepting lady’s underwear and the maxi skirt, but rejecting the lady’s trouser suit

¹ E.g. Anderson 1992.

² Cf. my 1992 Amsterdam inaugural lecture: van Binsbergen 1992a = 1994c. On the same problematic, cf. de Jong 1994, 2001; van Binsbergen 1994a, and, in the present book, chapters 9 and 10.

and miniskirt; accepting the video but rejecting the disco; accepting Coca Cola and Fanta but rejecting bottled beer; accepting – from the images of fast North Atlantic life on videos and TV – the expensive and prestigious motorcar but rejecting the open admission of a practice of sexual promiscuity, etc.¹

This non-authentic Africa, however inefficient and unpredictable in its details, is also for Africans a much more tangible reality than the mythical ‘authentic Africa’. And in this tangible non-authentic Africa, ICT is not an alien transplant, but an increasingly important aspect – taken for granted and no longer dispensable – of a socio-cultural milieu (notably: that of the African elites) that, while geographically situated in Africa, has from the nineteenth century (if not earlier) closely followed North Atlantic technological developments and has participated in these developments as a matter of course.

Exit thesis (1).

13.6. ICT as metalocal global culture

What remains is thesis (2):

‘(2) (2’) ICT is metalocal world culture, without local specificity and local validity, and hence (2’’) ICT is in principle devastating for any localising cultural identity like the African one.’

The above argument contains sufficient elements to render plausible the first part (2’) of this thesis, but what about the second part (2’’) ? Localising cultural identities, in Africa as elsewhere, exist in a tension vis-à-vis the globalising elements (including electronic ICT) that have spread so abundantly all over Africa. This tension is in principle not necessarily destructive, because as argued above, the new technologies may also serve to support historical identities. The apparently alien transplant may yet turn out to further in unexpected ways that which is local and identity, *pace* Mazrui and Gyekye. But in order to be able to serve that purpose, these technologies must be in the first place *available*, and must also – as a further condition – have undergone some degree of local acclimatisation. In Africa, these conditions are by now met for such communication techniques as the written press, radio, the telephone, television, cassette recorders and video; in many places these technologies demonstrably support and inform identity constructions. However, in most places in Africa this is not yet the case with regard to the Internet: there are far too few computers and providers, the electronic network connections are unreliable, the costs of Internet use are prohibitive for most Africans. Yet in the urban centres, around universities, and in the interplay with intercontinental migrants who, residing in the North Atlantic region, have come to regard Internet access as a matter of course, the computer is beginning to play an important role in the articulation of ethnic, cultural and religious identities. A large and ever increasing number of

¹ On these church practices in the context of the global market, cf. the contributions by Meyer and van Dijk, both on Ghanaian Pentecostal churches, in Fardon *et al.* 1999, and van Binsbergen 1997f: chapter 1.

African expressions are now available on the Internet, often as a result of Africans in the diaspora building websites largely for consumption at home, in Africa.

Still, the majority of the African population has as yet scarcely access to this medium so that it is not available as a direct expression of local identity. Whatever manages to present itself, and to maintain itself, under such conditions of scarcity, does so usually by virtue of non-local inputs in terms of interests, means and formats, and therefore would produce only the most misleading representations of what may yet pose as a local situation.

This state of affairs was particularly driven home to me with regard to the rural district of Kaoma, in the very heart of western Zambia. Here I have conducted anthropological and historical research since 1972. Only in 1994 could I, for the first time, make an international telephone call from this district; and only a year later could I, from the Netherlands, have my first e-mail contact with someone residing in the capital of this district.

Whoever searches the Internet for 'Kaoma' with any of the usual search machines, does admittedly find a number of hits that unmistakably apply to this district.¹ But whoever tries to construct an image of Kaoma district on the basis of these hits gets absolutely lost in the fog – the kind of fog that hangs over North Atlantic polders or prairies, not the kind that in the early morning hangs over Kaoma's *dambos* – wetlands – at the bottom of its shallow, wooded valleys, where duiker antelopes and wild pigs, and until the 1980s even buffaloes and elephants, are startled by local hunters; some of these hunters are in the employ of local princes, and some still wield Portuguese muzzle-loading guns from the nineteenth century ... Kaoma's representation on the Internet is a misleading travesty of the actual local situation, not a form of valid knowledge but a form of ignorance. The Kaoma district that speaks to us via the Internet is merely a reflection of the intercontinental presence in the district, including: a Dutch development project parading, on its website, an exceptionally successful local woman farmer (but one belonging to the locally hated, non-local immigrant group of the Lozi). Moreover, the USA-controlled evangelical parent body of the Evangelical Church of Zambia operates a major hospital in the district, and its matron shares her unmistakably Southern States spirituality with the visitors of her website

¹ 'Kaoma' is only a very short word and is likely to exist in several other languages and contexts than that of western central Zambia, where it has been the name of a district since 1969 (previously called Mankoya district), and the name of a stream since time immemorial. It is likely that the word 'Kaoma' has also penetrated the Internet from some of these other contexts, e.g. in Bemba, a major Zambian language, which however is not a *lingua franca* anywhere near Kaoma district, 'Kaoma' is one of the names of the High God. In a government move directed at Lozi rebelliousness, President Kaunda replaced the older district capital's name Mankoya by Kaoma in 1969. 'Mankoya' was based on the Nkoya ethnonym, while 'Kaoma' derives from the nearby Kaoma river and therefore was considered to be ethnically neutral. *Likota lya Bankoya*, a collection of Nkoya oral traditions from the first half of the twentieth century CE, proposes an etymology for the hydronym Kaoma in terms of the destruction of a king's ceremonial drums (in Nkoya called *mawoma*) in the nineteenth century CE (van Binsbergen 1992b: 389). However, hydronyms are notorious for their tendency to immutability over enormous stretches of time, which makes this recent etymology of Kaoma somewhat suspect.

13.7. ICT between the local and the global in an African context

The specific case of Kaoma suggests a situation around African ICT which I would deem eminently capable of generalisation: when it comes to knowledge production concerning Africa, the Internet only renders onto the outside world, what that outside world has put into the Internet in the first place. In this light there would seem to be little reason for the euphoria that generally attends the discussion of ICT in the circles of African intellectuals.¹ For the time being, we should look anywhere except on the Internet for valid and representative knowledge production on Kaoma district and its inhabitants.² And Kaoma district is representative for very many areas in Africa as a region where, despite the virtualisation and globalisation of life, the traces of older historical socio-cultural forms can still be discerned so that people may yet entertain the illusion – although it is an illusion and nothing else – that these forms have braved the decades or even the centuries.³

Meanwhile a new field of tension arises here: that between medium-specific format (in which inevitably the North Atlantic cultural origin of ICT shimmers through) and the contents, that in principle may be derived from all knowledge systems of all times and from all over the world. To the extent to which ICT is metalocal, it is valid to say that this medium – irrespective of its North Atlantic origin – may display a great flexibility as far as its specific cultural context of use is concerned. Sharing the cultural orientation, the mathematical rationality, the iconographic and aesthetic principles of the makers of ICT, is by no means a condition for the effective appropriation of this medium, and for the subsequent use of this medium for purposes and from the perspective of a world view that in itself would be rejected by that very same mathematical rationality. Many divination systems including African ones such as Ifa and Hakata, ‘voodoo’ (which has now become a globalised term without any meaningful referent to any specific ritual practice in any specific time and place, but which originally referred to the West African indigenous concept of *vodun* as the veneration of spirits through musical ecstatic ritual and libations, and the display of such paraphernalia as sacred beads and cloths), recently invented or re-invented traditions such as the *wicca* witch cult, forms of oriental systems of thought such as Taoism – all of these are well represented on the Internet. But when they appear there, it is almost invariably in a format (that of short written texts in a North Atlantic language, supported by visual material largely conceived in accordance with North Atlantic modernist or

¹ Cf. Nkwi 1995; Nyamnjoh 1997; Ras-Work 1998. Also cf. the central role which Thabo Mbeki, successor of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa, attributes to ICT: Mbeki 1999.

² My own texts, which often mention Kaoma district, have only been made available on the Internet as since March 1999, and apart from a few exceptions do not carry the catchword ‘Kaoma’ among their metatags. In mid-2001 an initiative arose among young Nkoya intercontinental migrants now in the United Kingdom to create a Nkoya Website, which was to enhance the visibility of Kaoma district on the Internet. This is another example of how new technologies of globalisation may help to articulate local identities.

³ Remarkably, one may also critique the Internet not because it offers incorrect, but because it offer correct information in Africa and therefore disturbs utopian identity constructions; cf. Okigbo 1995.

postmodernist aesthetic conventions as mediated by popular graphics computer programs) which implies a subjugation, domestication, of these non-Western forms of knowledge to North Atlantic models, at least at the formal and iconographic level. What is more, they often appear in the form of irritatingly gratuitous pseudo-knowledge, without critical apparatus – as sub-intellectual instant food, as a globalised and virtualised product (usually with a strong New Age element) that has only its name and superficial appearance in common with the original knowledge system that is claimed to be thus represented.

It appears as if ICT strikingly manifests the themes of unity and diversity, localisation and globalisation in the modern world. An analysis of ICT as attempted here forces us to discard the illusion of sharp distinctions between cultures and between continents; such illusions make up a widespread but distortive geopolitical, ideological mind-set concerning the structure of the modern world. Instead our analysis of ICT advocates a view based on a plurality of fields of tension and a plurality of kaleidoscopically superimposed and counteracting contradictions, between which the intercultural philosopher has to pick her way, just as prudently and falteringly as does the contemporary world citizen at large.

Let us now assess how the enculturation of ICT takes place in Africa itself as an aspect of globalisation.

13.8. How does the African enculturation of ICT take place?

13.8.1. The expansion of ICT in Africa

From the 1960s the computer has seen a consistent expansion, not only in the North Atlantic region but also in Africa. Also in that continent this expansion was marked by the rise of in-house computing by the transition from the main frame to the microcomputer, and the transition from input by means of punched tape or punch card to input via the keyboard, mouse, and computer screen. In government institutions and universities, and in successful, capital-intensive sectors of commercial life, a total transformation of the administrative workplace occurred. Until then the workplace was characterised by conventions that hailed from the colonial era: authoritarian relationships, over-staffing, defective competence, and ritualisation. New forms of management, co-operation (or, due to the physical and visual fixation of everyone to his or her individual computer screen, the absence of co-operation!), personal exercise of power, and career mobility, came within reach due to the microcomputer. Computer specialists took the place of accountants and other administrative personnel with an intermediate-level training. Women gradually gained their own place in this new set-up. Professional organisations were formed in order to guard over the new power and privileges to which computer skills gave access. Wherever the microcomputer was introduced, it tended to lead to a marked increase of responsibilities and competences of first-line administrative personnel. This led to fundamental changes in the labour relations within bureaucracies and

enterprises; moreover, vis-à-vis the public, the individual civil servant, now armed with a computer screen, could even more convincingly than before conjure up and exploit the image of the omnipotent state answerable to none – one of the most intransigent heritages of the colonial state in post-colonial Africa. Private training institutions began to exploit the new market generated by such expectations of professional upward mobility, steep rises in income, consumptive opportunities and security as were associated with computer-training certificates. Thus the collective technological utopia that was noticeable in the affected sectors of African urban life was mirrored by a personal utopia.

One of the few researchers who have carried out¹ richly-conceptualised empirical research on ICT in Africa had been the prominent African American anthropologist Benetta Jules-Rosette, in her book *Terminal Signs*. Although the path of her analysis is somewhat hampered by a social-contract view of national societies in Africa, and by her somewhat humourless loyalty vis-à-vis the African computer workers featuring in her research, she offers nice examples of the kind of contradiction that one may encounter in the field of African ICT:

‘A senior programmer at a Kenya wholesale outlet attempts to manage the transition from a labor-intensive NCR keypunch computer to a new electronic multi-user system while increasing the number of employees for whom he is responsible. If he increases the number of employees, although their individual work tasks have diminished, he will obtain the title of data processing manager and double his salary. Government administrators in Ivory Coast strive to develop a computer policy that will limit the activities of multinational computer vendors such as IBM, BULL, and UNISYS, while simultaneously encouraging these companies to invest in the country. The Kenyan government organizes the computerization of key government ministries but imposes stringent restrictions on public access to computers. These cases are not merely management conundrums. They share a common theme. Each case illustrates an effort to manipulate the narratives of public discourse in order to delimit everyday practices that constitute the adoption of new technologies. Computer policies project a specific representation of development and change.’²

The pattern of expanding ICT differs greatly between African countries. Government policy (as enshrined, among other documents, in national five-year development plans and in import tax legislation) varies between consistent furthering of ICT as a recognised precondition for post-industrialisation in Ivory Coast, via a restrictive and contradictory government policy in Kenya that yet slowly but surely achieves automatisisation, and via countries with a slow and vague take-off in ICT like Mali and Sudan, to countries which because of their absolutely stagnant economy or their civil wars are scarcely ready for ICT, like Niger and Angola. Until recently South Africa formed a case apart. This country has for one and a half centuries boasted an advanced industrial and scientific infrastructure, that however in the second half of the twentieth century had become tributary to the apartheid state. Hence ICT imports until 1990 were prohibited by an international boycott. This boycott however was only consistently observed by the Scandinavian countries, and

¹ Jules-Rosette 1990.

² Jules-Rosette 1990: 10f.

as a result South Africa has been, and remains, by far the most computerised African country.¹ South Africa is also the only African country that scores high (twentieth place) in the international list of Internet implementation and Internet use.

Not only international enterprises but also continental African institutions, research bodies, the UNESCO,² North Atlantic governments and development agencies are active in the field of enhancing ICT in African countries. For instance, the proceedings of the Second African Colloquium on Information Research, held in 1994 in Ouagadougou (the capital of the West African country Burkina Faso), were made into a prestigious book³ of close to a thousand pages, filled to the brim with formulas, diagrams, tables, bibliographies. Publication was made possible by an eloquent combination of national and international organisations: the University of Ouagadougou, the Burkinabé Ministry of Development, the University of the United Nations, the National Institute for Research in Information and Automation of Burkina Faso, ORSTOM (the French Institute for Scientific Research in the field of Development and Development Co-operation), PII-IIP (the intergovernmental information programme of UNESCO), CIMPA (the International Centre for Applied Mathematics), and the Association of African Universities. About half of the scores of authors contributing to the book are Europeans working either in Africa or in French ICT institutions; but the other half consists of African researchers. The entire world is involved in Africa's ICT, and ICT demonstrates that Africa is indeed part of the wider world – as an unmistakable aspect of the globalisation process in which the countries and societies of the African continent are increasingly drawn. Despite the abundance of ferrous dust (the African continent is one large tableland whose surface is coloured red by ferrous minerals), power failures, the constant threat of ritualisation, theft of hardware, and the unmistakable class formation and poverty, which means that for the time being only the happy few can effectively participate in ICT in Africa – despite these handicaps ICT is, in principle, just as much (or as little) at home in Africa as elsewhere in the modern world.

13.8.2. The tension between ICT euphoria, on the one hand, and the negative assessment of African globalisation, on the other

Meanwhile there is no lack of lengthy arguments that sing the praise of the potential, for Africa, of today's ICT especially the Internet. These arguments discuss technical limitations (defective infrastructure for example the telephone network, the number of ICT connections, the low quality of the servers available), economic aspects (poverty, and the fact that many Africans operate economically outside the formal sector of government and commerce and hence have no access to Internet), the transformation of the bureaucracy as discussed above, and the possibilities of

¹ Slob 1990.

² Cf. UNESCO 1980.

³ Tankoano 1994.

generating, in the rural areas of Africa, an innovating flow of information via the Internet.

The euphoric thought that ICT will mean a bright future for Africa is widespread, not only among intellectuals¹ but also among politicians. In this connection it is significant that Thabo Mbeki, Nelson Mandela's successor as president of South Africa, has attributed a decisive role to the ICT revolution in his blueprint of an African Renaissance.²

The euphoria is surprising. No doubt we must situate the spread of ICT in Africa in a context of globalisation, but where Africa is concerned globalisation is, in general, not a reason for euphoria but for profound concern. For Africa, economic globalisation has been synonymous with an ever-increasing marginalisation: the intercontinental proceeds from Africa's products has declined even despite increasing productivity; today Africa is involved in no more than one per cent of transactions in the world economy. Under post-colonial governments the continent's national economies have been disrupted due to mismanagement and the erosion of bureaucracies. These national economies have moreover been plundered by national elites who have appropriated the state. In most African countries the citizens have long since learned not to count on essential government apparatuses such as the police, the judicial powers, health services, educational services and public works. Because of the hideous debt burden, more money goes out of the African continent in the form of interest than it receives in the form of development aid, including balance-of-payments aid. Such Structural Adjustment Programmes as have been intercontinentally imposed upon African countries, have brought neither political stability nor economic rationalisation, but they have produced increasing impoverishment of large sections of the African population. Yet, at the same time, the increased communicative aspects of the globalisation process have led, in the most frustrating way, to the installation of new consumptive targets and new desires among the same population. Incapable to protect effectively (let alone actively take care of) their citizens, during the last few decades many of the African post-colonial states have been the scene of violent struggles involving regional and ethnic groups and political adventurers. Under the heading 'development co-operation', prolonged and many-faceted interventions from the North Atlantic region have yielded incidental local successes. This has contributed to the formation of a comfortable local point of address in the form of an NGO-based, servile, loyal and affluent local sub-elite that has great organisational and technical skills (including ICT). But all this has not been able to redress the overall miserable situation prevailing in Africa today.

It would appear as if the expansion of ICT in Africa coincides with the disintegration of African societies. Does that mean that Jules-Rosette's title *Terminal Signs* has (despite the optimistic positioning of its author) a *double entente*: does the

¹ Cf. Nkwi 1995; Nyamnjoh 1997; OAU 1995; Ras-Work 1998.

² Mbeki 1999.

title not just refer to the social and semiotic interpretation, by Africans, of the signs that appear on computer terminals? Do these very signs testify to the destructive contradictions, the almost terminal illness, of Africa today? Would Mazrui¹ be right after all and does ICT, as an unmistakable aspect of globalisation in Africa, establish the conditions for further economic subjugation of the continent? Do we have to add to this economic subjugation, a cultural subjugation in this sense, that African ways of interacting between fellow-humans and between man and world (ways whose praises have been sung so frequently in African ethnographies and African philosophies) are – as argued by Gyekye – miles apart from those social and cosmological models that are necessary for successful use of computers? In order to answer this question we must assess the cultural dynamics that surrounds ICT in Africa.

13.8.3. An empirical context of ICT enculturation: the Francistown cybercafé

Now if in principle, as argued above, ICT is just as much at home in Africa as elsewhere in the world, then let us go and visit it in Africa. In Southern Africa (not only in South Africa as mentioned above, but also in Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zimbabwe) the expansion of ICT proceeds faster than elsewhere on the African continent. In these countries cybercafés have proliferated in recent years as a sign of the increasing accessibility for a substantial proportion of the population. But before we become too optimistic about conclusions based on this phenomenon, let us take a closer look at one such a café as a place of ICT enculturation in Africa.

In April 1999 I spent a working week in a cybercafé in Francistown, Northeast District, Botswana. Francistown was founded a hundred years ago as a result of European capitalist interests. In the course of decades Africans came to constitute the majority of the population, and in the 1980s the town underwent rapid demographic and economic growth. Seen from the North Atlantic region, Francistown (the second town of Botswana boasting about 70,000 inhabitants in 1999) is an inconspicuous little town: an ugly agglomeration of endless rows of identical small houses grouped around two veritable shopping streets with traffic lights and modern buildings of up to two floors (malls, banks), flashing the logos of world brands: Adidas, Nashua, Texaco, Toyota, IBM, British Airways, etc. Seen from the villages that are still housing half the population of the African continent, Francistown is a baffling world city. This is where, in the late 1980s, I made my acquaintance with the fax machine, which until then did not play a role in my Dutch academic life. Hence I had high expectations of the cybercafé that was situated on the top floor of one of the newest malls.

I was disappointed. The cybercafé's hardware consisted of five customer-operated computers and one reasonably fast professional computer used as server for a few hundred Internet subscribers in the region. The front part of the shop was

¹ Mazrui 1977, 1978.

furnished for the sale of the current hardware and software; computer books could be found in an amazing abundance in the adjacent general news shop and bookshop, that has no links with the cybercafé. Francistown is an important centre of commerce and industry, and the vast majority of Internet subscribers are to be found in these sectors of the economy – as turns out when we search the Internet for ‘Francistown’ with one of the current search machines. In the week I was there, the designing of a website for a local bridal fashion shop took much of the attention of the cybercafé’s staff of four: the tawny-coloured manageress, who was equally fluent in Southern African English and Tswana; the Black male assistant with a fair basic knowledge of the Internet; the White female graphical designer; and finally the Black cleaning woman, a mature slightly corpulent lady whom the manageress and her other colleagues treated much as though she were a respected elderly family member, so that sometimes the impression given was one of a tightly-knit family enterprise headed by the cleaner. With one or two exceptions, the Internet café’s clients use only a minimal selection from the range of facilities offered: in a daily or weekly routine they hastily read and send a few e-mails (they are anxious not to overstep the cybercafé’s minimum fee of about one Euro per 15 minutes). Some ask for help when searching for the many Web sites that offer free e-mail accounts. Occasionally, young Black women would enter for advice on how to open e-mail accounts, manifestly at the instigation of absent South African White boyfriends, to enable them to stay in touch regularly and cheaply. Only very few people look on the Internet for a specific site, or prudently surf between sites, but after visiting a few sites even these customers vacate their bar stools with an eloquent look at the clock. All bodily and verbal contact between clients is shunned as if though they are catching each other in socially discouraged or tabooed behaviour. Staff–client contact is limited to a minimum, and nothing of the richly textured personal relationship between the staff is shared with the clients. Interaction in a public toilet could not be more impersonal. This lack of social exchanges contrasts markedly with Francistown public culture, in whose turbulent recreational setting the word ‘café’ has certainly connotations of sociability, exchange, self-presentation, status seeking through conspicuous consumption, the experience of identity by associating oneself with a fixed social and physical location in the recreational space. Most of the time, I am the only customer in the cybercafé. Even in a town as developed and dynamic as Francistown, obviously the target group of the cybercafé is only small: people who (to judge by their clothing and general appearance) could not afford a state-of-the-art computer (including the subscription to the electricity mains network, the telephone network, and the Internet), and who have no access to such hardware in their place of employment, but who nonetheless come to explore hesitantly the new information and communication technology. Enculturation, appropriation towards a local cultural programming is only very partially the case. On the contrary, for the customers the Internet would appear to form a secluded domain that one may appropriate instrumentally (at considerable cost of money, effort and frustration), but whose contents are not in line with the socio-cultural programming of one’s own life as a

Francistonian. The game of social relations grinds to a halt in the intimidating nearness of the computer. However, the cybercafé's staff have already regained their natural pose and thus manage to incorporate ICT in their everyday life in a much more natural manner. Preliminary conclusions made after a week in the Francistown Internet café: if the Internet is to be the hope of Africa, the realisation of that hope will take a while yet in large parts of Africa.

13.8.4. Backgrounds of ICT enculturation

How is ICT appropriated and localised in African environments, in the sense of the emergence of practices that amount to an original creative elaboration upon this new technology, in the course of which its local symbols and meanings – both old and new – are conferred upon that technology?

Above I sketched a field of tension, one of whose poles was that ICT might be primarily thought of as eminently North Atlantic. In this respect ICT fits in with an ideal of the appropriation, by Africans, of European symbols of power, prestige and success. During the colonial period (which incidentally lasted considerably less than a century in most parts of Africa) this ideal spread widely over the African continent. It was expressed in styles of clothing, coiffure, housing and interior decoration, family life, choice of mode of transport, recreation, religion – not only among the elite but also among a much larger urban middle class, and, to some extent, even right up to the remotest corners of urban slums and of the rural areas.

We should not read too much positive submission in such adoption, by Africans, of North Atlantic cultural models. Here, as always when it comes to the adoption of cultural elements across sizeable distances in space and/or time, a considerable 'transformative localisation' occurs:¹ that which was initially alien is encapsulated by more or less altering its form, meaning, use, or a combination of these aspects, according to principles that already exist locally. Nowadays, decades after the African states gained their independence, the structure of African elites has changed considerably. They have become more inclusively and unabashed cosmopolitan, global. But the elites continue to search for prestigious lifestyles and symbols of domination; this is what they have in common with socio-political elites wherever in the world. The exercise of power in contemporary Africa increasingly takes place within the framework of formal organisations (such as the state, the army, the party, the enterprise, the church, the trade union, the university), but this framework tends to be much more loose and less compelling than in the North Atlantic region, far more subject to personal and particularistic manipulation. Often the formal organisations in Africa do not work effectively, and if they do work to some extent this may be due less to bureaucratic and legal rationality, than to patronage, ethnic manipulation and informal social networks behind the façade of the formal structure.

¹ On the term 'transformative localisation', which refers to the process of local accommodation by which, in the course of diffusion, a geographically displaced item of culture is transformed so as to fit the systematics of local cultural orientations, cf. Binsbergen 1997g.

Here virtualised models of social and political power are being mediated that are not rooted in the North Atlantic heritage but instead in pre-colonial forms of leadership and initiative within kinship groups and pre-colonial states. In many parts of Africa, for several centuries before the effective European colonisation of the continent, trade goods hailing from afar were the symbols of an unrivalled power over life and death (e.g. firearms), the means of access to the supernatural (e.g. imported Dutch gin, which came to constitute the preferred libation liquid at African shrines), and the attributes of an incomparable prestige (textiles, Chinese glazed ware, Ancient Egyptian artefacts, European clothing, etc.). The appropriation of ICT as a means of power must also be seen in this light: not as the imitation of the power and lifestyle of Europeans, but as a localised means of prestige that, at the same time, constitutes a real means for the exercise of power in the African social environment. It appears to be a common trait in any system of power, no matter where it occurs in space and time, inside and outside Africa, that the effective exercise of power by means of physical violence, by force, goes hand in hand with an ensemble of collective representations which draws this exercise of power into the domain of the numinous and the speculative, that projects it into a magic of power, and hence facilitates people's submission to that power without them openly confronting it.¹ In Africa, this magic of power has of old taken the form of a discourse on sorcery² – of evil that is perpetrated by humans in an extrasensory way, and that forms one of the major indigenous explanations of misfortune. In many African societies connotations of sorcery have of old surrounded those occupying high statuses and specialising in the communication with a human, extra-human or supra-human outside world at the boundary of local society: the king, the headman, the diviner-priest-healer, the blacksmith, the bard, the trader. Although the roots of this complex of collective representations lie in a local kinship order that goes back at least to Neolithic agricultural communities, during the last few decades Africa has seen an intensification of sorcery as an idiom *par excellence* for the articulation of the contradictions of modernity – the tension between consumptive desires, and (as a condition to fulfil those desires) the breaking up of historic forms of social organisation, solidarity, morals and ethics.³

In this cultural framework the individualised microcomputer fits very well. In the first place as a new prestige object of elitist power, and as an instrument for the effective exercise of power in the management of social, political, and commercial information, processes, and contacts. But also, and particularly, because ICT conjures up the numinous magic of power so strikingly, with its flashing, uncannily real images, its high speed and instantaneous access which give the impression that space and time appear to submit to the user/owner of the microcomputer. Thus,

¹ Cf. Taussig 1997. For an African application of similar ideas, cf. Binsbergen, 1992b, 1993d, and for a theoretical elaboration applied to Ancient Mesopotamia, cf. van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 1999.

² Cf. van Binsbergen 2001b.

³ Cf. Geschiere 1997.

especially in the eyes of uninitiated onlookers, old magical dreams such as bilocation, omnipresence and omnipotence appear finally to come true. For instance, in Benin today the computer is known as *grigri yovo*: ‘the magico-religious object¹ of the Whites’, and the Internet is explicitly equated with *vodun*.²

The microcomputer and especially the Internet have therefore inserted themselves not only in the recreational practices of African elite children and in the scientific data collection of African intellectuals, but also in the power strategies of prominent African politicians and entrepreneurs, and of those aspiring to join their ranks. In the practices of these politicians and entrepreneurs this state-of-the-art form of ICT is often seen to occur in combination with:

- modern natural science and business economics,
- more traditional magical practices (diviner-priests are frequently consulted for political and economic success and for protection of such success), and
- esoteric world views (theosophy, Rosicrucianism) that from an Orientalising or Hermetic periphery of North Atlantic rational thought are in the process of spreading Africa much as they are spreading in the North Atlantic region, in the New Age context.

That the African enculturation of ICT is triggered not only by specific technological and career advantages but also by the desire to explore and appropriate a comprehensive new lifestyle, and even new idioms of social and cosmic power, is suggested by a remarkable research finding from Francistown, Botswana.

My research on the urban culture of Francistown as a window on both local rural traditions and on the process of cultural globalisation in Africa brought me in close contact with the three highest-ranking local leaders of the cult of the High God Mwali. This cult is a pre-colonial organisation that has now superficially reorganised itself, displaying to the state the appearance of an effective modern formal organisation (a professional association of traditional healers, and an African Independent Church) that is more in accordance with Botswana civil law.³ The three priests combine their high office with flourishing therapeutic and herbalist practices, and in addition operate – in line with a widespread Southern African pattern – a bar, a bottle store, a butchery, a transport company and a dancing troupe. Inside their modern, detached houses, designed and appointed according to cosmopolitan standards, their domestic lives centre on the television set crowned with plastic flowers and surrounded by a circle of heavy armchairs with embroidered head covers. Apparently Africa’s consumptive modernity (whose aesthetics appear to be somewhat dated and second-rate from a North Atlantic perspective) can very well be combined with religious leadership of an originally pre-colonial type. The point now

¹ I avoid the word ‘fetish’ which without further discussion would only give rise to confusion.

² Personal communications, Elly Reinierse and (via Elly Reinierse) Ulrike Sulikowski.

³ Cf. van Binsbergen 1993b.

is that all three of these cult leaders have young adult daughters who around 1990 were vaguely active in their fathers' cults (e.g. in some sort of receptionist capacity, attending to callers seeking therapy and ritual advice), but who primarily pursued introductory computer training – these daughters were thus among the few Francistonian women who at that time could mobilise the financial means and the kinship support for their personal ventures into ICT. As specialists in an old sphere of power, these specialists, through their daughters' computer training, made sure not to miss out on a new sphere of power.

Of course, the perception of ICT as magical and as kindred to sorcery, in the eyes of political and economic leaders and of those – almost all of them devoid of computers – over whom they hold sway, is only one aspect of the localisation of ICT in Africa. I have already mentioned its uses in offices and by intellectuals. Here we see a combination of purposeful rational behaviour, on the one hand, characterised by universalist procedures and assumptions (bureaucratic management, information processing), and, on the other, not so much dreams of computer-underpinned power (as among the political and economic elite), but certainly utopian pondering on personal career success and on the redress of Africa's ICT backwardness as compared to the North Atlantic region. This utopian aspect constitutes an additional incentive to acquire computer skills, and lowers the thresholds towards ICT reception.

All this means that within contemporary African societies, too, an extensive and many-sided discourse about computers has developed, which facilitates the further personal and collective appropriation of ICT. Again the situation is not fundamentally different from that in the North Atlantic region: one does not need to command, or even to emulate, the mathematical and micro-electronic rationality of the designers, in order to use the computer effectively as a black box – the methods of such use are learned, formally or informally, in a circle of equals (secondary school pupils and university students, friends, colleagues, system managers in training), and in a way in which ordinary everyday spoken language turns out to play a remarkably great role – even if spiced for the occasion with intercontinental computer terms that are preferably left untranslated and undomesticated. Here again we see the tension between local and global, intracultural and metacultural, which makes ICT such an interesting ground for the investigation of interculturality.

These two factors together, namely the appropriation (in a colonial, pre-colonial and post-colonial context) of alien artefacts within more or less elitist frameworks of power, magic and utopia, and the fact that culturally the computer is a user-friendly black box which is serviceable anywhere, globally, meta-locally – furnish us with the beginnings of an answer to the obvious question as to why the reception of ICT in Africa has displayed such a remarkably low thresholds, in other words, why the incursion of ICT into Africa has met with so little resistance and has been so readily accepted – *as if cultures do not exist any more.*

13.8.5. From book to web in the African context

I suspect that in connection with the low thresholds to ICT in Africa, other factors might be adduced in addition to the two already mentioned. These additional factors refer to the structure of communicative and procedural connections in ICT such as those it has developed globally, in the form of hypertext, hyperlinks, and the nested and layered criss-crossing structures engendered in that context. Before the advent of computerised ICT, information management and information transmission was largely modelled on *the book*. This implied the model of a large, unique, self-contained and clearly demarcated quantity of information, highly organised and internally consistent, almost exclusively verbal (i.e. not visual, auditive, motoric, etc.), and as such linearised from beginning to end, in such a way that in principle the medium cogently prescribed one, and only one, path through this information. Such a book model has provided the unit of knowledge production for five millennia, in the Ancient Near East including Egypt, Graeco-Roman Antiquity, China, India, the world of Islam, and finally Europe. The ‘book model’ emerged particularly in Ancient Egypt, where from the New Kingdom onwards the many copies of the papyrus-leaf *Book of Coming Forth by Day* (better known as the *Book of the Dead*) are only one example of the proliferation of books as the central repositories of knowledge, cherished at the ancient temple academies called ‘Houses of Life’ (*prw ʿnkh*). A copy of the *Book of the Dead* was a standard grave gift.¹ By contrast, the Ancient Mesopotamian books formed conceptual units held together by titles and rubrics, but were physically distributed over a considerable number of clay tablets and hence did not display physical unity. After the book model the idea of the human person was also modelled.² The same model also informed the idea of the formal organisation with its legal (text-based) authority; and probably it was also the book model that informed the idea of the distinct culture, each culture being a specific item in a range of a plurality of cultures, and codified by means of a certain genre of books, notably ethnographies, whose titles (e.g. *The Nuer*, *The Ila-speaking peoples*, *The Plateau Tonga*, etc.) corresponded with the cultures under study. The world’s subjugation to North Atlantic hegemony between the eighteenth and the twentieth century of the North Atlantic Common Era meant: subjugation to the book (including the Bible, in so far as this subjugation took the form of the spread of Christianity). And also the much earlier submission of large parts of Asia, Europe and Africa to Islam, following the Prophet Muhammad’s departure (*hijra*) from Mecca as the beginning of the Islamic Era, amounted to a submission to the Book, notably the Qur’an. Not only the colonial subjects’ subjugation, but also their subsequent assimilation and final emancipation (by appropriation of North Atlantic models of equal rights, socialism, trade-unionism, formal education, franchise, etc.) meant internalisation of the book model. In Africa this disciplining in terms of the book model has taken root only partially, even though millions of Africans today are

¹ Cf. Budge 1989; Allen 1974.

² I owe this suggestion to my colleague Jos de Mul.

indistinguishable from the North Atlantic readers of the present book, and from its writer, in terms of formal education and employment within formal organisations. However, African societies have never quite turned into book-style cultures in the same way as this process has advanced progressively in the North Atlantic region and especially in the latter's urban centres. In West African English, the expression 'You know book' has become a standard expression for the person who has a formal education, praising him and setting him apart as a relative exception at the same time. Over the last century the domain of globalisation and virtualisation has certainly been an expanding aspect of African societies, but the size of that domain in proportion to the totality of African life has always remained limited. A considerable part of African life continued to take place outside formal organisations, and whatever was created in terms of formal organisation functioned mainly informally, if at all. The linearity and consistency of the book model did fit a North Atlantic modern world characterised by social and political relations that have largely taken on an instrumental nature, have lost much of their former ritual and symbolic aspects, and therefore have lost much of their meaning. The individuals involved in these relations are increasingly atomised, autonomous and competent; they live their lives in great (though in recent years diminishing) political and economic security. Most Africans in colonial and post-colonial settings have always lacked such security, and this is one explanation among several others as to why the book model – in other words atomised individuality, the viable and smoothly functioning formal organisation, the linear path thorough social, political and symbolic relationships, and the almost total disenchantment of the world – have never occurred in Africa at a scale anywhere comparable to the North Atlantic region. In modern Africa one has always needed to compensate the insecurities of the modern, urban, state-based aspects of social life, by maintaining (as far as possible) old systems of kin-based and ethnic solidarity – orientated toward the village with its centuries-old practices and systems of representation encompassing many domains of life, and with its concomitant, endlessly proliferating and branching networks of social relations. For excellent reasons, the relational *network* has proved to be a very fertile concept in the study of African towns, where informal networks turned out to form for the most part the principal format of social structuring.¹ But also in African rural areas the network model applies, particularly where a bilateral or matrilineal kinship system, high rates of divorce, and the absence of fixed and permanent corporate groups, create the inchoate, fluid social process typical of, notably, South Central African societies. In this African context it is normal to think in web-like structures, which would be dismissed as inconsistent, incompetent and insufficiently bounded from the point of view of the book model. In this connection there are many points for further research on such crucial topics as:

¹ Mitchell 1969.

what is the consequence is of this web-like or rhizomatic,¹ typically African, social structure, for people's orientation in space and time; the local definition (as porous? as ambiguous?) of the person within such a ramifying environment; the nature of the social and physical space? How might this web-like orientation facilitate, in its turn, modern uses of computers? Is it necessary to appeal in this connection (as Afrocentrist are bound to do) to a special vitality of African cultures, to some special innate talent of Africans? Do we need to invoke some special type of 'savage thought'² that allegedly might characterise informal, non-academic situations inside and outside Africa? Or is it enough if, for an explanation of the continued survival in Africa of *non-formal, non-booklike practices and concepts* (that in North Atlantic societies have been largely supplanted by the state and by other formal organisations with their enormous influence on daily life and the everyday experience), we merely refer to the extent of *colonial and post-colonial insecurities attending the formal situations* have been created in Africa by North Atlantic initiative?

For as long as the book remained the norm, and for as long as the forms of communication associated with the book predominated, Africa with its un-booklike response self-evidently lagged behind in ways that it would never be able to make up for. It is not the computer in itself which constitutes an assault on the formal and the linear in information, and puts on end to the book as the gold standard. Rather, such a revolution is being prompted by the ramifying, rhizomatic forms in which information is being presented and may be managed on the Internet and in the hypertextual structures within microcomputers. 'The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner'.³ Not, of course, because they are Africans, but because they are in a privileged position to bring out the problem and potentials of the South, of 'the Third World', in our times⁴, modern Africans have as a matter of course mastered the skills needed to survive with their families in an social context characterised by the tension between, on the one hand, the insecure, urban, formal environment, and, on the other hand, the manifestations – which also to Africans are often ambivalent – of a persisting but eroded system of kin-based and ethnic solidarity with ultimately a rural and historical referent. In such a context one seldom puts all one's eggs in one basket, but instead one tends to cultivate and operate simultaneously many contacts, many strategies, many obligations, many kin relations along a multitude of alternative genealogical paths, with many

¹ Cf. the concept of 'rhizome' with Deleuze & Guattari, with which they seek to contrastively pinpoint, for contemporary North Atlantic society, the transformation from the book model to a freer form of subjectivity, one which makes

'it possible to let the individual and/or collective instances come to the fore as self-referential existential Territories, adjacent to, or functioning as boundary conditions for, an alterity which in itself is subjective' (Guattari 1992; my translation).

² Lévi-Strauss 1962.

³ Mt 21: 42.

⁴ *Grosso modo*, to Asia and Latin America the same perspective applies.

compromises, many contradictions between these commitments – with a logic that is inclusive rather than exclusive, and that prefers not to abide by the principle (which has governed the entire Western philosophical tradition) of the excluded third, in the hope that one may be allowed to have one's cake and eat it at the same time. This structural feature permeates all aspects of African life especially in the increasingly insecure post-colonial situation. It is highly manifest in situations where public life is constantly on the verge of total collapse, such as depicted in recent ethnographic studies by René Devisch and Filip de Boeck on Congo-Kinshasa.¹ Freely translated towards computer practice, the art of living needed for such situations reminds one of practices for hypertext-based Internet use on the modern computer. This would mean that the modern African is someone who is at least as well equipped, if not better, for the mental requirements of state-of-the-art computer use, as the North Atlantic adult, whose main handicap in the computer era may very well prove to be his attachment to the gold standard of the book.

But we have not yet reached the stage when Africa can cash in on this apparent advantage in the handling of web-like structures. The inhabitants of the North Atlantic region, and East and South Asians, are very strongly represented in the world of ICT, while most Africans are relative newcomers there. In this connection, the Northerners and Easterners (world-wide) may continue to boast their skill in the handling and improvement of formal systems. For after all, the rhizomatic structure of the actual application of ICT, however much tending towards the chaotic, requires us to begin with a strictly formal, logical point of departure in the algorithms and technologies used. But also with regard to formal systems, Africans have their own local traditions. It is not impossible that Africans training in ICT may derive some unexpected advantage from their being acquainted with indigenous African formal systems such as mathematical board games² and divination methods³ that are encountered all over the African continent. Hountondji, the African philosopher, who has so strongly criticised the construction (in the hands of his African colleagues and their North Atlantic supporters) of an African mystique under the pretext of philosophy,⁴ considers the exploration of such historic local forms of science, mathematics and technology an important field of research.⁵ The purpose of such research is not so much to help explode racial stereotypes and to gather points in favour of Afrocentrism. Its main purpose is to further, among Africans, a proud

¹ Devisch 1995a, 1996; de Boeck 1996a, 1996b.

² Zaslavsky 1990; Seidenberg 1960; Schmidl 1915; van Binsbergen 1997c.

³ Maupoil 1943a, 1943b; Bascom 1980; Abimbola 1975; Akiwowo 1983; Måkanjúolá 1991; Kassibo 1992; Traoré 1979; Aromolaran 1992; the present book, chapters 5, 6, and especially 7.

⁴ Hountondji 1996. Incidentally, Hountondji's position has been contested, not only by particularising and essentialising Africanist philosophers, but also by a cosmopolitan African philosopher like Appiah, 1992; cf. Irele 1996.

⁵ Hountondji 1994.

Chapter 13

and empirically underpinned vision of their own competence and their own birthright to engage with modern technology.

***Ubuntu* and the globalisation of Southern African thought and society**

To the memory of Vernie February

14.1. *Ubuntu* in various Southern African contexts and in a researcher's personal itinerary

Over the past twenty years,¹ *ubuntu* (a word from the Nguni language cluster which comprises Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, and Ndebele) and the equivalent Shona word *hunhu* have been explored as viable philosophical concepts in the context of majority rule in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In the hands of academic philosophers, *ubuntu/hunhu* has become a key concept to evoke the unadulterated forms of African social life before the European conquest. The world view (in other words the values, beliefs, and images) of pre-colonial Southern Africa is claimed to survive today, more or less, in remote villages and intimate kin relationships, and to constitute an inspiring blueprint for the present and future of social, economic and political life in urban and modern environments, at the very centres of the economy and the political system. It is thus that *ubuntu/hunhu* also serves as a concept in management ideologies in the transitional stages of post-apartheid. How does one manage the contradictions of the post-apartheid situation? That situation comprises: Africa's most viable economy; a highly complex, largely urban and industrial society; an over-developed state apparatus originally geared to oppression of the majority of its population; caste-like intra-societal divisions in terms of wealth, education, information, and concrete social power; the newly-gained constitutional equality of all South African citizens; the rising expectations among Black people who have historically been denied the White minority's privileges of class and colour; the majority's simmering resentment, both about past wrongs and about the slowness of present compensations and rewards; a drive among individual Blacks to gain

¹ The earliest publication on *ubuntu* known to me is: Samkange & Samkange 1980; see also: Bhengu 1996; Khanyile 1990; Khoza 1994; Louw n.d.; Makhudu 1993; Mbigi 1992, 1996; Mbigi & Maree 1995; Prinsloo 1996, 1998; Ramose 1999.

financial and occupational security as quickly as possible; the highest rates of violent crime in the world today; and above all the general traumatisation that comes with having lived under, and having survived, the apartheid state: being forced to realise that no amount of economic gain and political power can erase the permanent damage to the personality through earlier humiliation, oppression, exclusion, and loss – and the desperate question as to what source of wisdom, identity, meaning, salvation could heal such trauma. The contradictions which this combination of traits presents have been manifest in myriad forms over the past decade. To confront these contradictions by an effective, factual renewal of social, economic, judicial and political life is a formidable task, one that needs new and historically unsuspect concepts, new sources of meaning and transformation, among which that of *ubuntu* has been prominently proposed.

The form of the word *ubuntu* (and all equivalent forms in neighbouring languages) is purely productive in the morphological linguistic sense. It is the result of coupling the prefix generating abstract words and concepts (i.e. *ubu-*, in the Nguni languages) to the general root *-ntu* which one and a half centuries ago persuaded the pioneering German linguist Bleek¹ to recognise as a large Bantu-speaking family: the entire group of languages, spoken from the Cape of Good Hope to the Sudanic belt, where the root *-ntu* stands for ‘human’.² Today we consider Bantu as a sub-family of the Niger-Congo linguistic family, which encompasses most of sub-Saharan Africa. Several morphological combinations involving the root *-ntu* are possible in any Bantu language; for example, in the Nkoya language of western central Zambia, the following forms appear: *shintu* ‘human’, *muntu* ‘a human’, *bantu* ‘humans, people’, *wuntu* ‘human-ness, the quality of being human’, *kantu* ‘Mr Human’, *Buntu* ‘the country of humankind’, etc.

Now, it is only human for such a basic word to have a very wide and internally richly textured semantic field, a vast area of possibilities and implications, out of which in concrete contexts a specific selection is being made, triggered by the juxtapositions which accompany the root *-ntu* (in its specific morphological elaborations) in that context.

Such a semantic field may be mapped out by born speakers of Bantu languages on the basis of their introspection, but it is also open to empirical study by anyone

¹ Bleek 1851.

² There are indications that the root *-ntū*, and its semantic field, are not really unique to Bantu languages. In Proto-Austronesian, i.e. Malayo-Polynesian languages an essentially similar root, *taw*, appears with the same meaning ‘human’; cf. Adelaar 1994. The distribution of these languages is not limited to South East Asia and the Pacific: also the languages of Madagascar belong to this group, and some South and South East Asian influence on the formation of Bantu is quite likely; cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e), (a). A cognate form probably exists even in proto-Sino-Tibetan **d@:lH*, ‘bottom’, which in Old Chinese became *t@:j*, 底, ‘bottom’, modern (Beijing) Chinese *dǐ*³, see Karlgren 1957: no. 0590 c. It is quite possible that we have another cognate, in the Indo-European domain, in the root **endh*, ‘low’ ‘turned towards the earth’, which has been argued to underlie Ancient Greek *anthrōpos* and *Athēnē*; and which incidentally we may also suspect under the West Germanic words *under/unter/onder*. Cf. Ode 1927.

who assesses the characteristics of the various situations in which expressions featuring the root *-ntu* can be overheard.

Thus, in the context of ritual in a Southern African village setting without strangers present, *-ntu* will primarily be used in opposition to the non-human visible world of the animal, vegetal and mineral kingdom, and to the invisible world of the supernatural, spirits, ancestors, gods, God. In this cosmological domain, not too much emphasis would be placed (as would be the case in Islam and Christianity) on the differences between *-ntu* and other ontological categories, but instead the essential continuity between these categories would be acknowledged. When a hunter, after killing a large animal (lion, elephant), cannot simply return to the village but has to be cleansed first at the village boundary as if he were a murderer, this rule defines both the village as the purified, domesticated domain of the human by contrast to uncontrolled nature, and also the anthropomorphic qualities attributed to the animal in the sense of being capable of taking revenge and requiring propitiation.¹ The notion of supernatural transcendence is only weakly articulated in this Southern African world view. Hence the difficulty of attributing the inevitable element of decay, death and destruction in human life to a transcendent divine agency; instead, in a sorcery-based conception of evil, humans tend to be blamed for the negative side of life.

Somewhat contrasting with the cosmological application of *-ntu*, in a socio-legal context, when articulating the nature and degree of a person's transgression of social and religious norms, *-ntu* is likely to be used in order to juxtapose the inhuman, not in the sense of 'being bestial or divine', but in the sense of being 'of humans, but transgressing the scope of humanity'. The latter applies to sorcery; to extreme and uncalled-for violence especially between kinsmen; and to the extreme transgression of codes of conduct which regulate the behaviour between genders and between age groups (showing disrespect vis-à-vis elders, overburdening under-age children, committing incest and murder, etc.). There is a clear link here with the world view discussed in the preceding paragraph: under such human transgressions, nature is supposed to grind to a halt, life force is reduced to a minimum, and as a result crops fail, births stagnate, and death prevails, until the cosmological order is restored by socio-legal-ritual means – by a king if the society as a whole is affected, by a lesser chief or a diviner-priest in cases of more restricted scope. Two ways are open to handle the contradiction between 'human' and 'no-longer-human' under this aspect of *-ntu*: the transgressing person may be coaxed back into the folds of humanity (by means of collective reconciliation, prayers at the ancestral shrine, elaborate admonitions, ritual cleansing, judicial action, payment of a fine), or declared to be hopeless and treated accordingly. In the latter case, the return to humanity is ruled out by killing the perpetrator – either by administering the poison ordeal under the supervision of a king, chief or diviner-priest, or, in the absence or behind the back of these authorities, by lynching. This shows that *-ntu* as a legal category is not

¹ This is the situation among the Nkoya and throughout South Central Africa; cf. Marks 1976.

infinitely accommodating, not without boundaries: extreme anti-social behaviour is its boundary condition.

Finally, when strangers are part of the social situation in which the concept *-ntu* is being used, especially in the colonial and post-colonial situation in Africa, *-ntu* invokes *local, autochthonous* humanity, by contrast to beings who somatically and historically clearly stand out as *not* autochthonous, and whose very humanity therefore may be called into question, or even denied. The colonial officer, the missionary, the anthropologist, the capitalist farmer, the industrial manager and entrepreneur, for a century or more right up to the to the establishment of Black majority rule in Southern Africa, could never (and would never) aspire to the status of *muntu* in the eyes of the African majority population. In the colonial situation, therefore, the word *muntu*, or in its plural form *bantu*, emerged, in English and Afrikaans as spoken by the White dominant group, to contemptuously denote African colonial subjects – by opposition to their political, industrial and spiritual, self-styled ‘masters’, the Whites.¹ ‘White *muntu*’, ‘*muntu*-lover’, etc. was a common insult used by Whites against those who, despite European somatic features and origin, transgressed the boundaries of colonial society and identified with Blacks against the perceived, short-term interest of the White colonial presence. For a White person entertaining such *Wahlverwandschaften*² with Blacks in the colonial and post-colonial situation, part of her or his struggle for an Africa-oriented self-definition was to be accepted, by African friends, as *muntu*.

Indeed, I shall never forget how deeply moved I was when, after more than ten *years* of intensive contact with the Nkoya people in the context of anthropological and historical fieldwork in Zambia, one of my close Nkoya friends explained my position to another Nkoya man who, not knowing me personally, was uneasy about my presence in an otherwise fully Nkoya environment. My friend said:

Byo, baji muntu, baji kankoya – ‘no, can’t you see, he is a [Black] person, he is a Nkoya’.

Against this background it was a shock for me to be denied *muntu*-status in the urban, capitalist environment of Francistown, Botswana, and the surrounding Northeast District, a part of Botswana that ever since the late nineteenth century had been thoroughly exposed to the devastating effects of White monopoly capitalism. There, any person having (like me) Dutch as his ethnic identity and mother tongue, was irrevocably³ a hereditary enemy, a *liburu* (‘Boer-

¹ Cf. Branford *c.s.* 1991, p. 208, *s.v.* *munt(u)*: ‘An offensive mode of reference to a black person.’

² Goethe: ‘identifications not by blood but by choice’.

³ Much to my surprise. In line with the general public view of domestic history held in the Netherlands in the second half of the twentieth century CE, I took it that the ancestors of the South African Afrikaners, or Boers, parted company with their European brothers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, then in the nineteenth century changed their language into a version of Dutch that is no longer commonly understood in the Netherlands, and finally in the twentieth century committed crimes against humanity that for the two reasons mentioned no longer deserve to be associated with the ethnonym Dutch, and that the Dutch of the Netherlands could not be held collectively responsible for. But this was a slightly naïve and anachronistic view. It did not do justice to the factual, and many-sided, linguistic, intellectual, religious, political and demographic continuity between Afrikaners and European Dutch until the middle of the twentieth century – a continuity that was in line with racist attitudes prevailing in the Netherlands’ Asian and South American colonies right until their end. This embarrassing continuity only came to be denied as far as the past is concerned, and to be

thing', *li-* being the prefix reserved for inanimate objects), and could never become a *motho* ('person-human', in the Tswana variant of the *-ntu* root). Being denied personhood landed me in a depression from which after a few years, thanks to the local treatment that was extended to me, I emerged as a *sangoma*: a local, i.e. African, diviner-spriest, specialist in divination and healing, by public rituals and initiations confirmed in the status of *autochthonous human person*, and moreover, like all traditional religious and therapeutic specialists in Southern Africa, a recognised guardian of the spiritual principles that underlie local society. It is then also that I could realise how much my earlier identity as an investigating, empirical anthropological fieldworker, professionally insisting on the otherness of my African research subjects and on my own strangerhood, constituted an ideology of absolute otherness embarrassingly similar to the restricted concept of *muntu/bantu* in the apartheid sense of African colonial subject. It is this insight that made me leave cultural anthropology behind and instead pursue a form of intercultural philosophy where dialogical intersubjectivity is taking the place of scientific objectivation.

This stance informs the peculiar methodology of the present argument. While I do make use of social science insights into the nature of contemporary Southern African societies (including those based on my own research), I will attempt not to objectify from a scholarly distance; but I will also try to avoid another pitfall: I will not go along with the invitation, extended to the worldwide intellectual community by the Southern African academic codifiers of the concept of *ubuntu*, to treat their intellectual products merely as autonomous philosophical texts, whose contents we may critique academically without going into the specific sociology of knowledge to which these products owe their existence and appeal. Instead, I shall make a personal participant's contribution to the continuing dialogue on issues of identity, values and conflict. Recognising the utopian and prophetic nature of the concept of *ubuntu* will allow me to see a vast field of positive application for this concept at the centre of the globalised urban societies of Southern Africa today. *Ubuntu* philosophy, I will argue, constitutes not a straight-forward *emic* rendering of a pre-existing African philosophy available since times immemorial in the various languages belonging to the Bantu language family. Instead, *ubuntu* philosophy will be argued to amount to a remote *etic* reconstruction, in an alien globalised format, of a set of implied ideas that do inform aspects of village and kin relations in at least many contexts in contemporary Southern Africa; the historical depth of these ideas is difficult to gauge, and their format differs greatly from the academic codifications of *ubuntu*. After highlighting the anatomy of reconciliation, the role of intellectuals, and the globalisation of Southern African society, my argument concludes with an examination of the potential dangers of *ubuntu* as mystifying real conflict, perpetuating resentment (as in the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission), and obscuring the excessive pursuit of individual gain. Finally, the potential released by *ubuntu* will be brought to bear, self-reflexively, on this argument itself, in a bid to

felt as a source of embarrassment and therefore to be effectively terminated in the present, as a result of critical reflection on the atrocities of apartheid, from the 1960s onwards, when I was only a secondary school pupil and university student; see also Part III, where my being identified by others as an Afrikaner in Francistown plays a major role.

overcome what otherwise might appear to be merely a stalemate between South and North intellectual production.

14.2. Ramose on *ubuntu* and globalisation

The book *African philosophy through ubuntu* which my friend and former colleague Mogobe Ramose published in Zimbabwe in 1999,¹ is in several respects a remarkable and refreshing contribution to African philosophy. Its background is not (as in most other African philosophy) the societies of West or East Africa but those of Southern Africa; current philosophical work from Africa, Belgium and the Netherlands features among the book's references while the French influence, so extensive in much of African philosophy, is limited in this case; and the author's specialisation in the field of the philosophy of international relations (instead of metaphysics, classics, or African Studies) is reflected in the book's emphases. Its final chapter deals with globalisation and *ubuntu*, and here the argument may be summarised as follows. The globalisation process, in which the modern world is increasingly drawn, amounts to the ascendance of a market-orientated economic logic of maximisation, in which the value, dignity, personal safety, even survival of the human person no longer constitute central concerns. This process is reinforced by the North Atlantic region's drive for political and cultural hegemony. African societies have suffered greatly in the process, but their lasting value orientation in terms of *ubuntu* holds up an alternative in the sense that it advocates a renewed concern for the human person. This alternative, Ramose argues, is already available, and is constantly applied, in the peripheral contexts of villages and kin groups in Southern Africa today, but it is also capable of inspiring the wider world, where it may give a new and profound meaning to the global debate on human rights.

Because I am a declared and recognised Afrocentrist,² such a line of argument should be music to my ears. The argument is in line with the recent exhortations toward an African renaissance.³ The general attitude implied in this position may be summed up as follows:

'Africa, which the force of North Atlantic hegemony has for centuries relegated to the periphery of global social, economic, and cultural life, proudly and defiantly declares that it possesses the spiritual resources needed to solve its own problems even though the latter were caused by outside influences – and recommends the same spiritual resources as remedy for the ills of the wider world beyond Africa'.⁴

Ubuntu as a form of African philosophy thus blends in with other potential, imagined or real gifts of Africa to the wider world: African music and dance, orality

¹ Ramose 1999.

² Amselle 2001: 109; Obenga 2001: 23; van Binsbergen 2000d, 2000c.

³ Cf. Mbeki 1999; Mr Mbeki here allowed himself to be inspired by Afrocentrist ideas first formulated by Diop in one of the earliest of his published articles: Diop 1948, 1996.

⁴ This again is not a quotation but my own vicarious attempt at making the implied argument explicit.

and orature, kingship, healing rituals in which trance and divination play major roles, a specific appreciation of time, being and personhood – all of them cultural achievements from which especially the North Atlantic region could learn a lot and (to judge by the latter's dominant forms of popular music and dance throughout the twentieth century) is increasingly prepared to learn, in a bid to compensate such spiritual and corporeal limitations and frustrations as may be suspected to hide beneath the North Atlantic region's economic, technological, political and military complacency.

14.3. Recognising the utopian and prophetic nature of ideology: The dilemmas of deconstruction

We should appreciate such a line of argument as utopian and prophetic.

The word 'utopian' comes from the Ancient Greek *ou-*, 'no-', and *topos*, 'place'; it designates the act of evoking an ideal society which is – as yet – nowhere to be found except in the philosopher's blueprint. The production of utopias constitutes a most respectable philosophical tradition: starting with Plato (whose work described *utopias* in *Timaeus* and *Republic* without using the technical term; and whose treatment of Egypt¹ is often utopian); then Plutarch (whose idealised description of Sparta is decidedly utopian); then via Thomas More's *Utopia*, and via Swift's and Montesquieu's caricatural utopias of the early Enlightenment which were only thinly disguised descriptions of their own times and age, to Engels, Mannheim, Bloch, Buber, Dahrendorf – after which the concept ended up as a cornerstone of intercultural philosophy in the work of Mall.²

Less of a recognised philosophical concept is the term 'prophetic', associated as this term is with philosophy's pious twin-sister theology, with the epistemological pitfall of foreknowledge, and with the mystical distancing from rationality.³ By its Ancient Greek etymology, prophetism consists in '[officially] speaking on behalf of'. It embodies the herald's role to which, throughout the Ancient World, special sacredness and sanctuary attached.⁴ It is the very act of such representation and mediation that is almost universally recognised as sacred, even regardless of the divine, royal or hieratic nature of the party on whose behalf it is spoken. Intercultural philosophers and ethnographers should pay the greatest attention to this cultural formatting of what is, after all, their own role. Intercultural philosophy and ethno-

¹ Froidefond 1971.

² Cf. Bloch 1973; Buber 1950; Dahrendorf 1957; Engels 1947; Hommes 1973-1974; Mall 1995 (where the 'localisingly placeless' – *orthaft ortlos*, p. 78 – plays a central part); Mannheim 1936.

³ Prophetism scarcely enters into philosophical discourse. In epistemology it may be occasionally – e.g. in mediaeval Jewish philosophy (cf. Rudavsky 2000: 101) – invoked as a boundary condition for the knowledge and agency attributed to a supreme being. However, cf. Derrida 1996, which does stress messianic and prophetic traits.

⁴ Cf. Kristensen 1966.

graphy are, at best, prophetic commitments. I therefore use ‘prophetic’ here not in the sense of speaking in the name of God, but as addressing the ills, contradictions and aporias of one’s time and age: conditions which one shares with many other members of one’s society, which one therefore has felt and grappled with in one’s personal life, and which, once articulated in more general terms on that personal basis, are recognised by one’s fellow-humans as illuminating, encouraging and empowering.¹ It is this ‘prophetic’ methodology that largely informs the present argument; the other methodological theme is my conviction that it is pointless to study the contents of a philosophy (such as *ubuntu*) in isolation – *in vitro* – without constant reference to the particular sociology of knowledge by which it came into being and by which it is perpetuated.

Serious problems await the intellectual if she or he fails to perceive utopian and prophetic statements as such, and instead proceeds to an empirical critique as if such statements are meant not primarily to muse and to exhort, but to give a factual description. Let me be allowed a personal example once more:

As beginning lecturers in sociology at the University of Zambia, in the early 1970s, my colleague Margareth Hall and I were invited by that institution’s department of extra-mural studies to tour the capitals of outlying provinces in order to lecture there on State President Kaunda’s contributions to political philosophy and ideology, ‘Zambian humanism’² – which had become the official philosophy of the country’s ruling United National Independence Party (UNIP). Inexperienced, and still without any real-life understanding of African political and social realities, we fell into the trap of publicly and lengthily critiquing Zambian humanism for presenting a distorted, nostalgic, one-sidedly positive portrayal of South Central African village life in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The message was jocularly received in Mansa, Luapula Province, where UNIP had nothing to fear and where the two of us constituted a welcome, though juvenile, intellectual divertimento straight from the national capital. However, things were very different in Mongu. This provincial capital had recently been renamed Western Province to stress the central state’s supremacy after that province had for more than half a century entertained semi-independence as the Barotseland Protectorate.³ Elections were

¹ For such an approach to prophetism, developed in relation to twentieth century prophets (Mupumani, Tomo Nyirenda alias Mwana Lesa, Alice Lenshina) proclaiming radical transformations of historic African religion in Zambia, cf. my *Religious Change in Zambia* (van Binsbergen 1981a). The underlying philosophical theory would be Marxist, as throughout that book; also cf. Torrance 1995. In recent philosophy, similar ideas were taken up by Foucault’s archaeological method, which seeks to identify, as part of a philosophically underpinned history of ideas not without Marxist inspiration, the internal relations between discursive elements in a particular historical period without recourse to actors’ explicit intentions and representations (Foucault 1963, 1969). Ironically, Foucault’s later, Nietzsche-inspired, ‘genealogical’ attempt to accommodate *change* in this perspective, made him stress contingency at the expense of the (Marxist- and structuralist-inspired) structural, systematic and hence repetitive correspondences between society and person on which my view of prophethood depends. Part of the irony is that here he shows himself a diehard historian, member of a discipline that has always defended, as its hallmark, as ‘properly historical’, an emphasis on contingency in the face of historicising social scientists like myself who look for pattern and systematic explanation; but equally ironic is that even such a sense of the historical discipline’s *esprit de corps* has not prevented Foucault from being a great and innovative mind but a poor historian, especially in his pre-genealogical period. Also cf. chs. 1 and 2 of my *Religious change*, for a further elaboration (without reference to Foucault) in the context of spirit possession and mediumship, and on the possibility of a sociological theory of religious change.

² Cf. Kaunda 1966, and n.d.; Dillon-Malone 1989; van Binsbergen & Hall 1972.

³ Caplan 1970.

approaching, Mongu was a stronghold for the opposition, and our visit coincided with a vote-rallying visit of UNIP leader Fines Bulawayo. In a formidable public speech the latter contested our right, as recently arrived expatriates straight from our European universities, to meddle in local political thought. For weeks we were kept in suspense, fearing to be declared prohibited immigrants, when finally a personal, remarkably appreciative, letter from Mr Kaunda himself saved the situation.

Reflection on this Zambian case may help to bring out the dilemmas that attend, thirty years later, the concept of *ubuntu*.

Viewed as a moral and political exhortation and an expression of hope for a better future, *ubuntu* (just like Zambian humanism) creates a moral community, admission to which is not necessarily limited by biological ancestry, nationality, or actual place of residence. To participate in this moral community, therefore, is not a matter of birthright in the narrower, parochial sense. If birthright comes in at all, it is the birthright of any member of the human species to express concern vis-à-vis the conditions under which her or his fellow humans must live, and to act on that basis. Incidentally, the inclusive principle identified is part of the Southern African normative system at the village level, where for instance every adult has the obligation, but also the right, to guard over the interests of all children, regardless of the specific genealogical ties between adult and child. The moral community consists of people sharing a concern for the present and future of a particular local or regional society, seeking to add to the latter's resources, redressing its ills, and searching its conceptual and spiritual repertoire for inspiration, blueprints, models, encouragement in the process. In South Africa this is the programme of the *African renaissance*. Afrocentricity¹ creates another such moral community, focusing not on a particular locality or region, but on the African continent as a whole. The people thus implicated may be expected to identify with each other and to be solidary in the pursuit of their concern. Whoever sets out to deconstruct and even debunk the available conceptual and spiritual repertoire publicly, dissociates from this moral community, rents its fabric, and jeopardises its project. From this perspective, Mr Bulawayo, in the above example, was certainly right; and we can understand how Mr Kaunda was able to save the situation by explicitly (re-)admitting, by his charismatic personal intervention, two young Europeans into this moral community.

Leaving the moral and politically mobilising aspect aside, and speaking on a more detached and abstract plane of analysis, we could say that whoever attempts such deconstruction of ideology is guilty of overlooking the distinction between *locutionary* (\approx factual), *illocutionary* (\approx putative) and *perlocutionary* (\approx persuasive) speech acts – a distinction that ever since Austin has proved so fertile.² It is easy to see that Zambian humanism and *ubuntu* are not, in the first place, factual descriptions. They primarily express the speaker's dreams about norms and practices that allegedly once prevailed in what are now to be considered *peripheral* places

¹ For references concerning this intellectual movement, see Postscript to chapter 4, and the main text of chapter 15.

² Austin 1962. For an up-to-date review of this perspective, cf. Avramides 1999, and references cited there.

(notably, within the intimacy of allegedly closely knit villages, urban wards, and kin groups), while the speaker herself or himself is situated at or near the national or global centre. Such dreams about the past and the periphery are articulated, not because the speaker proposes to retire there personally or wishes to exhort other people to take up effective residence there, but because of their inspiring modelling power with regard to central national and even global issues – in other words, because of the alleged persuasive/perlocutionary nature of these dreams¹ outside the peripheral domain in which they are claimed to originate and to which they refer back.

If, thirty years later, I have much less difficulty in identifying, in my capacity as a social actor in a concrete Southern African setting, with *Zambian humanism*, and with *ubuntu*, it is because I have enjoyed, for these many years, the (part-time) membership of the kind of local communities by distant reference to which these two ideologies have been constructed in the first place. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s I have learned *Zambian humanism* and *ubuntu*, not so much as a value system spelled out explicitly (although there was that element, too: during court sessions, weddings, initiation rites, funerals), but especially more implicitly: as a diffuse value orientation informing the lives of others more local than I was then myself. I shared their lives as, alternately, they now applied and affirmed, now transgressed and rejected, these values, within the dynamics of conflicting pressures brought about by personal aspirations; by the sociability expected in a village and kin context; by the multiplicity and mutual incompatibility of their various roles and social ties; and by urban and modern goals, incentives and boundary conditions. It was in terms of this very value orientation that I was allowed to share their lives, and despite frequent transgressions both on my part and their own, this admission to their communities has been one of the greatest sources of pride and joy in my life. It is an honour from which I do not wish to dissociate myself permanently by an act of conceptual deconstruction – even though this refusal greatly complicates my life as both an analyst and a participant, as this book (especially Part III) brings out in detail. This

¹ Peter Crossman, in a personal comment, wondered whether such concepts as Austin derived from ordinary English-language use, reflecting the very specific syntactics of expressing modality in that language, could appropriately be applied to languages outside the Indo-European language family, like those of the Bantu language sub-family (a major subset of the Niger-Congo language family), whose syntax is very different. The question implies a specific application of the Whorf–Sapir thesis, according to which it is primarily language that structures our image of reality. In general, the difference between Indo-European and other languages would appear to be relative, not absolute. The recently emerged field of Nostratic studies explores a level of language classification (the macrofamily) subsuming Indo-European with many other languages whose combined areas stretch from Dakar and the North Cape, to the Bering Street, Alaska and Greenland, encompassing most of the Old World and part of the New World (cf. Dolgopolsky 1998; Bomhard & Kerns 1994). In addition to language, but supported by extensive language continuity (of the Dene-Sino-Caucasian macrofamily, rather than the Nostratic one; cf. Shevoroshkin 1991; van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e)), there is the evidence of a widespread Upper Palaeolithic cultural substrate, which even if by now fragmented and subjected to much localising transformation continues to inform part of the cosmology, conceptions of the body, health, healing, power, animal symbolism etc. over much of the Old World. So intuitively, I would strongly disagree with Crossman’s point. However, in this specific case the problem does not really arise, since *Zambian humanism* and academic *ubuntu* philosophy are originally expressed in the English language.

stance has brought me to embrace the status of diviner-priest and to identify with and to represent vocally *Afrocentricity*.

14.4. The value orientation of the village and the kin group is not standard in Southern Africa today

The value orientation of the village and the kin group, as sketched above, is not within easy reach of the globalised, urban population that has become standard in Southern Africa. Outside contemporary village contexts, it is only selectively and superficially communicated to the Southern African population at large. Much as I endorse Ramose's point that Southern Africa has something of great value to offer to the globalised world, we differ with regard to the role we assign to globalisation in this connection. For Ramose, globalisation is an outside phenomenon to be countered by *ubuntu*; I, on the contrary, argue that both contemporary Southern Africa, and *ubuntu* itself, are among the products of globalisation, and can only be understood as such products.

In the final analysis our two positions will turn out to be much more compatible than this juxtapositioning suggests. We simply attach different meanings to *ubuntu*. Playing down the well-established hermeneutical insight that all representation is distortion, Ramose sees in *ubuntu* the value orientation of pre-colonial Southern African villages, which in his opinion is faithfully rendered in the contemporary academic statements of *ubuntu* philosophy. For Ramose, globalisation, while a worldwide process, in Southern Africa specifically stands for the European, Northern conquest, which has resulted in the large-scale destruction of *ubuntu*-based communities. From this perspective, a revival of *ubuntu* counters the course of Southern African history and is a remedy to the trauma caused by colonisation and by the imposition of capitalist relations of production. I, on the other hand, see *ubuntu* in the first place as a contemporary academic construct, called forth by the same forces of oppression, economic exploitation, and cultural alienation that have shaped Southern African society over the past two centuries. With Ramose I subsume these forces under the term of globalisation. However, on the basis of an extensive discussion of format, I deny the identity between the academic evocation in the form of *ubuntu* philosophy and the actual value orientation informing pre-colonial Southern African villages. Therefore, although *ubuntu* philosophy may be able to curb some (certainly not all) of the contemporary traumatic effects of globalisation/conquest, it is a new thing in a globalised format, not a perennial village thing in an authentic format.

Let me elaborate. In South Africa today (and by extension throughout Southern Africa) the established, socially approved and public norm, especially in urban areas, revolves around the emphatic consumption of globally circulating manufactured products; formal education; world religions; formal organisations that structure the state, industry, schools and churches, and civic self-organisation; and notions of authority, causality and truth patterned by constitutional democracy, the Enlighten-

ment, and modern global science. For the Southern African urbanite, especially the urbanite under forty years of age, to fall short of this norm is to admit personal failure, backwardness, rebellion, sin. Of course, this means that, as a result of destructive Northern conquest and the subsequent imposition of colonialism and capitalism, there are hardly any ways left to render the contemporary urban and national situation meaningful in terms of an ancestral local cosmology. Urban consumptivism and cosmopolitanism form the other side of historic trauma.

In such a situation, religious and therapeutic leaders have a number of options open to them: from traditionalist defiance, via a combination of the old and the new,¹ to an emphatic rejection of local historic cultural forms (as among African Independent church leaders – who often however smuggle into their Christian practice historic local elements in disguise). To ordinary people without any religious or therapeutic specialism, the strong pressure of globalisation in the public culture leaves open mainly three strategies to adopt vis-à-vis local historic cultural and religious forms.

The first lay strategy, adequately recorded in the extensive descriptive literature, is that of joining any of the many thousands of Christian churches that have abounded in Southern Africa since the nineteenth century. Here an essentially imported symbolic idiom, often implicitly blended with local historic elements, creates ‘a place to feel at home’ – a sense of identity and agency largely dependent on the forces of globalisation, yet often capable of restoring dignity.

The second lay strategy, blatantly obvious yet relatively little reflected in the available social-science literature, is to become a ‘nominally-local non-initiate’. Today the majority of inhabitants of Southern Africa, and especially of the Republic of South Africa, have been so effectively exposed to globally circulating cultural, productive, reproductive and consumptive models, underpinned by equally global technologies of information and communication (including the printed press, radio, television, the Internet, and globally circulating styles of dress, self-definition, recreation and work), that they are no longer in any direct contact with, have no longer any real competence with regard to, the values, beliefs and images of Southern African village societies. If these non-initiates would wish to tap these resources (and their most likely reason for occasionally doing so would be a profound existential crisis calling for traditional therapy), they have to learn the values, beliefs and images of the village more or less from scratch, as if they were cultural strangers. It is for this reason that the practice of the traditional healer in Southern Africa today in large part involves re-education and re-conversion of modernised clients: from nominal locals (who are effectively non-believers in historic African religion) to local initiates who are at least competent at the lay level and who can thus begin to play the role of therapeutic and ritual clients of these

¹ As the case I described for the urban *sangomas*: representing a traditionalising ritual idiom in an urban context which not only is thoroughly globalised and commodified, but whose modern and globalised features also penetrate the very texture of the *sangomas*' everyday life and ritual practice; cf. van Binsbergen 1999c.

ritual specialists. For the same reason the images of traditional life circulating in urban Southern Africa are superficial and stereotyped at best, and often substantially beyond the truth.

The third strategy, frequently pursued by moderately globalised persons in Southern Africa today yet only sporadically recorded in the social-science literature, is to submit publicly to the pressures of displaying a globalised modern culture, while in the more hidden niches of life, village forms are allowed to play some part, as long as this part is publicly hidden and dissimulated by the person in question.

Thus one can easily be a smartly dressed office clerk pursuing a modern career during the day-time on weekdays, a patron of fashionable cocktail bars after work, and a prominent Christian church elder on most Sundays, spending the rest of the weekend on the construction of a modern house along municipal regulations at some site-and-service residential scheme, while on certain nights in the wee hours one frequents shebeens where alcohol consumption and casual sex are combined with the chanting of ancient songs featuring clans and totems and jokingly challenging those present from other clans – only to return to the village (at a distance of up to a few hundred kilometres) once a month in order to engage there in ritual obligations imposed by the ancestral and High God cults. The latter activities would be kept completely invisible at the urban scene: one will deny – except before people hailing from the same village – all knowledge of and allegiance to them once back in town. In other words, village cultural and religious forms go into hiding under this strategy – they exist only underground and cannot be publicly articulated within the globalised urban space, given the fact that public culture is largely under the spell of Northern conquest and of the subsequent denial of local historic identity under South African apartheid and Zimbabwean colonialism.¹

Incidentally, this third strategy, if pursued by intellectuals, is the main source of first-hand knowledge of village conditions as a basis for theorising on *ubuntu*.

Under the circumstances produced by these three strategies combined, the majority of the population of Southern Africa today cannot be properly said to know and to live *ubuntu* by virtue of any continuity with village life. They have to be educated to pursue (under the name of *ubuntu*) a *global and urban reformulation* of village values. And they learn this on the authority, not of traditional diviner-priests to whom one cannot appeal in the globalised space without great personal embarrassment, but of recognised opinion leaders of the globalised centre: politicians, university intellectuals. And the latter can only reach the globalised urban population if – and this is a point we shall have to come back to below – they cast their message in a format that has currency and legitimacy both for themselves and in the globalised space at large. *Ubuntu* as a model of thought therefore *had* to take on a globalised format simply in order to be acceptable to the majority of modern Southern Africans.

This brings us to an examination of the format under which the values, beliefs and images informing village and family life are historically produced. But let us first take a closer look at the most obvious context in which the concept of *ubuntu* is

¹ I have expressed this view of Southern African ‘traditional’ culture as going underground in a number of articles, e.g. van Binsbergen 1993b, 1993a; also chapters 5 and 6 of the present book.

being applied, that of reconciliation at the central, urban sectors of post-apartheid South African.

14.5. The anatomy of reconciliation and the role of intellectuals in Southern Africa today

As a transformative concept in Southern African large-scale societies recently emerged from devastating armed conflict, *ubuntu*'s general application is in the sphere of reconciliation.

Now, reconciliation is called for whenever two conflicting parties are opposed to one another yet each may be recognised to have substantial reasons to claim that right is on their side; in such a situation (typical of intercultural contexts, when two life-worlds, two universes of meaning, confront each other; but not limited to such intercultural contexts) no appeal to legal rules will offer a way out of the impasse, because it is precisely the subjective perception, on both sides, of what is right which has created the impasse. Reconciliation now creatively invents an argument of a higher order, in the light of which both parties may voluntarily let go of their subjective conviction of being right, persuaded by considerations of a higher value which, on second thoughts (and with a considerable amount of inventive prodding on the part of the conciliator) both parties turn out to share. Reconciliation therefore amounts to the active creative redefinition, by conceptual and emotive sleight-of-hand (in other words, the deliberate bending of reality for the sake of the solution of conflict) of a situation which, without such redefinition, could only remain a stalemate.

This is how conflict settlement seems to work in numerous cases. In African societies, which tend to be incompletely domesticated by formal organisations, including the state, interpersonal and intergroup conflict often dominate the social process. The social fabric is woven not out of the avoidance but out of the settlement of conflict, by elaborate social technologies (including litigation, ritual, reconciliation) which – at least at the small-scale and intermediate levels – are among the most effective in the world.¹

Such a model of reconciliation will go a long way towards the identification, and the solution, of the kind of conceptual, legal, religion and moral stalemates which largely make up the contemporary, globalising, multicultural world. Reconciliation can be produced by sleight-of-hand, by pressing into service a Grand Narrative or Myth, which often has been invented *ad hoc* and which is ultimately performative and illusive.

If parties in a conflict define themselves by some kind of particularism that ties them to a locality, a form of production, gender, age, ethnicity, collective experience, etc., then an appeal to universal humankind would provide the ultimate high-order argument, not just in the case of *ubuntu*, but in all human situations. We must realise

¹ Chapter 11.

that in many other contexts, outside Southern Africa, the appeal to humanness or humanity occurs in ways very similar to those proclaimed by *ubuntu*. The very term ‘human rights’ suggests as much: it defines¹ not primarily – for such would be superfluous – the ontological entities to whom these rights apply (*humans*), but especially the extent of their application: universal, applying to *all* humans.

Where do such effective Grand Narratives come from in the modern world? We owe the term to Lyotard,² but it is Foucault³ who has called our attention to the fact that, at least in the North Atlantic region during modern times, the societal legitimation and micropolitical underpinning which used to be provided by religion, since the Renaissance and certainly since the Enlightenment has increasingly derived from *scientific* knowledge production. First in the North Atlantic region, and subsequently (after the colonial conquest and its post-colonial consolidation under USA hegemony) on a global scale, science has become the main recognised source of truth, morals, rights and justifications. A conciliator seeking to invent a higher-order reason to bring about reconciliation between two parties locked in a stalled argument, could not do better than to appeal to the world of academia, finding there a new argument which the conflictive dialogue between the parties has hitherto overlooked.

The dominance of North Atlantic scholarly, legal and expressive forms, and the commodified formats defined in those contexts (books, articles, Internet documents, videos, movies, CDs, etc.) mean that arguments effectively originating outside the North Atlantic region, from a totally different and historically fairly unrelated context, stand a good chance of gaining greater conviction if paraded in the name of global (but effectively, as far as their most recent history is concerned, North Atlantic) scientific knowledge production. It is the irony of many identity constructions and identity claims outside the North Atlantic region today that in order to succeed, in order to be taken seriously by their actual and potential adherents and by others including national and international governmental bodies, they need to be formulated in the academic and commodified formats stipulated (even imposed) under North Atlantic hegemony.

There is an alternative, however, that has become more and more articulate in the most recent years. In the final quarter of the twentieth century, as a result of a number of factors (the international oil crisis, Khomeiny’s Iranian revolution, the massive intercontinental migration of Muslims to the North Atlantic region, and the demise of international communism), Islam has emerged on a global scale as the main viable alternative, the main challenge, of the North Atlantic claim to cultural, economic, military, technological and spiritual hegemony. The Palestinian conflict, the Gulf War, the attacks on New York and Washington of 11 September 2001, the

¹ The literature on human rights is vast: e.g. cf. Renteln 1985; Scholze 1992; Meron 1991; and from a more general philosophical perspective: Monroe 1996.

² Lyotard 1979.

³ Foucault 1963, 1969, 1975.

subsequent Afghanistan and Iraq wars, are among the manifestations of this challenge and counter-challenge. This is the background of the continued rapid expansion of Islam in Africa today – even though Africans have suffered under Muslim and Christian hands alike in previous centuries, today Islam seems to offer them a global alternative to the North.

A familiar technique to sweep under the table the intolerable submission to North Atlantic models which this process entails, consists in playing down the North Atlantic nature of the format, calling it universal or global instead. And it is quite possible that a genuine transformation, a genuine trans-hegemonic redefinition, takes place in the dominant format, once it is successfully appropriated, adapted and improved upon by intellectual and social constructors who are not in or from the North Atlantic region. In chapter 13 I have explored the global, yet North Atlantic, positioning of Information and Communication Technology in the light of its subsequent, fairly successful African appropriation. There I have argued that it is not the denial of:

- (a) North Atlantic antecedents
- (b) nor of successful African appropriation and enculturation,

but the recognition of the irresolvable polarity, of the tension relationship between (a) and (b), which provides us with a model that helps to understand the cultural and political contradictions of the modern globalised world. Applying the same insight (which I consider fundamental for intercultural philosophy), we could acknowledge the tension between ancestral and global formats and contents in *ubuntu*, without seeking to resolve that tension by opting for either of these complementary poles and denying authenticity and legitimacy to the other pole. Let us now investigate both poles in their own right.

14.6. The format of values, beliefs and images informing village and family life

For a proper understanding of the nature and the societal locus of the concept of *ubuntu* in Southern Africa today it is of the greatest importance to appreciate the specific format under which the ideas, beliefs and images informing today's village communities and family situations present themselves. Both as an anthropologist and as a diviner-priest, I have familiarised myself somewhat with these formats. The village and family world view is presented by the people as time-honoured, ancestral, unchanging. But this may be deceptive in the light of the familiar model of the 'invention of tradition'.¹ All we know for sure is:

- that these values, beliefs and images are propounded *today*,

¹ Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983.

- that (like any world view wherever and whenever) they inform people's thoughts and behaviour *only partially and far from totally*, and
- that even in the remotest places and most intimate, most strongly signified situations these values, beliefs and images are *often confronted with antagonistic pressures deriving from more globalised domains of contemporary Southern Africa*.

It is not only the villagers and academic *ubuntu* philosophers of Southern Africa who may be suspected of inventing tradition. Also as ethnographers and analysts we are often brought to project the world view we encounter during our research back into the past, at least by a few centuries, perhaps the time of the emergence of the Bantu language family, or even further to the invention of agriculture and animal husbandry – the productive basis of the African village. It is especially tempting to see in today's village life an unaltered continuation of the normative patterns governing nineteenth-century villages as peopled by the direct ancestors of present-day villagers.¹ But we could only be reasonably sure of such continuity on the basis of extensive historical research, which (although frequently conducted and leading to numerous published products, whose enumeration and critique is beyond the present scope) is severely handicapped by the paucity of vernacular nineteenth-century sources and by the fact that the nineteenth century is sinking below the horizon of living memory and reliable oral tradition. What is more, on theoretical, epistemological and comparative grounds we have to suspect that the Southern African village and the social and normative patterns that governed it, instead of constituting a perennial lived reality, have to some extent been a creation of colonial administration, missionary activities, industrial relations based on labour migration, and social anthropological aggregate description.² Anyway, even if it ever were a reality, in the course of the twentieth century the Southern African village increasingly became a myth³ – not only in the hands of anthropologists, administrators, industrialists and missionaries, but also as reappropriated, from such alien sources, into African perceptions and expressions of identity and nostalgia – as happened also to the concepts of tribe, ethnicity and culture.⁴

In other words, we cannot be sure that even at the level of late-twentieth-century villages in Southern Africa, the concept of *ubuntu* (or Zambian humanism, for that matter) is more than perlocutionary or illocutionary: constituting not so much the enunciation of an actual practice, but at best a local ideology to which appeal is made whenever actual practice is initiated (for example at initiation rites and

¹ Given the great geographical mobility of most African social forms, the location of the nineteenth-century ancestral villages is unlikely to coincide narrowly with the villages, if any, of their descendants in the late twentieth and early 21st centuries.

² Ranger 1983.

³ Van Binsbergen 1998a, 2001b, the section entitled 'The virtual village'.

⁴ Ranger 1982; the present book, chapter 15.

weddings) or whenever actual practice is argued (in conflict settlement, divination) to stray too far from this ideal. On such occasions, and in line with my general characterisation of reconciliation as presented above, utterances invoking principles of sociability reminiscent of those which Southern African philosophers have summarised under the heading of *ubuntu* are set in a context of elaborate rhetorical arts in which the available cultural material is presented in a strategic, eclectic, and innovative manner. These verbal elements are often so complex, cryptic, multi-layered and internally contradictory,¹ archaic, and multi-referential,² that the socio-ritual events in which they feature produce *implied* meaning (as a vehicle of sociability within the village and the kin group, but also leaving open the possibility of the opposite of sociability) much more than that they articulate *explicit and codifiable* meaning. Traditional religious leaders and therapists (locally called *banganga*, *dingaka*, *basangoma*, etc.), as well as village elders, chiefs and the specialists (both women and men) supervising puberty initiation, are the guardians and articulators of this world view. Their specific ritual, therapeutic, linguistic (cf. proverbs, archaic and honorific expressions, tabooed words), legal and historical knowledge, in the way in which it is socially utilised in its own proper context, is not systematised, not codified. It is oral, vernacular, rambling, situational. It does not exist in the itemised, linearised, generalised, objectified format of discursive academic descriptions whose globally converging format has crystallised out in the course of the last few millennia in a context of literacy, the state, formal organisations, world religions, worldwide trade, universalising science, and other globalising tendencies. The embeddedness of the Southern African local specialist knowledge in the day-to-day physical and social environment of the rural community and its productive and reproductive processes lends to the local expressions of this knowledge a tacit meaningfulness, a powerful self-evidence, which is practically impossible to reproduce or even to obliquely indicate or suggest outside this original setting except perhaps – *under a totally different format* – by the elaborate technology of the imagination at the disposal of the novelist and the film-maker. I have never witnessed the technical terms *ubuntu* (or local morphological equivalents) or *Zambian humanism* being used as a matter of course, of accepted parlance, in these concrete situations of the village and the family. At best they have been used as in quasi-quotation, introducing into the vernacular world of the village and the family a deliberately stilted (and often somewhat ironical) reference to the

¹ My critique of *ubuntu* amounts to the allegation that academic codifications of local knowledge after a globally circulating format tend to streamline, linearise and rationalise that knowledge almost beyond recognition. The point can be generalised to include the entire industry, so fashionable since the 1980s and so nicely financed by donor organisations and the UNESCO, that concentrates on capturing ‘indigenous knowledge systems’ and brings the product of such capture into global circulation, allegedly in order to save such knowledge from extinction, but in fact producing the opposite result, notably, its replacement by a hegemonic travesty.

² In ways exemplarily studied in the works of such anthropologists of religion as Victor Turner, Jim Fernandez, Richard Werbner, and René Devisch; cf. Turner 1967a, 1968b, 1969; Fernandez 1982; Werbner 1989a; Devisch 1984, 1993.

outside world of literacy, politics and ideology. These terms do not belong to the format of expression proper to those situations. The *meanings* covered by those terms are admittedly at home in the village and the family, but (because of the various perspectives of *-ntu* as discussed in the opening section of this argument, and because of the complex, largely implicit way of expressing local social models as indicated in the present section) this semantic complex cannot be said to be articulated predominantly, let alone exclusively, by reference to various nominal forms of the root *-ntu*.

14.7. Ubuntu as a deceptively vernacular term for an *etic* concept formulated in a globally circulating format

Therefore, to describe the values, beliefs and images in operation at the village and family level as ‘the Southern African indigenous philosophy of *ubuntu*’ amounts to a rendering (in discursive academic, specifically philosophical, terms which exemplify globally circulating conceptual usage) of ideas that are certainly *implied* in Southern African village practices and ideas, but that exist there under different, much more diffuse and situationally varying, linguistic formats. *Ubuntu*, in the sense of the conceptual complex which modern exponents of *ubuntu* philosophy claim to exist around that term, is at best a transformative rendering in a globally mediated, analytical language, of vernacular practices and concepts which are very far from having a one-to-one linguistic correspondence with the phraseology of *ubuntu* philosophy.

Half a century ago the social anthropologist and linguist Pike coined the paired concepts of *emic* and *etic* to capture a similar distinction.¹ The systematisation of *ubuntu* as an alleged indigenous philosophy is an *etic* practice that remotely, analytically and transformingly represents *emic*, i.e. vernacular practices that take place in peripheral contexts in present-day Southern Africa, and that in meaning, but not in strict format, may more or less correspond with the explicit, rational, discursive statements as published.

The self-proclaimed experts on *ubuntu* form a globally-informed, Southern African intellectual elite who, remote in place and social practice from the *emic* expressions at the village level which they seek to capture, have officially coined the concept of *ubuntu* as a cornerstone Southern African self-reflexive ethnography.

While the format in which the philosophy of *ubuntu* is cast in contemporary treatises is that of the Western tradition of discursive philosophical argument, these intellectual productions have a more specific ancestry in the spate of writings which, under the general heading of ‘African philosophy’, have been published by African intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century CE.

¹ Pike 1954; cf. Headland *c.s.* 1990, with an interesting short contribution by one of today’s most prominent philosophers: Quine 1990a. Also cf. the extensive discussion of this pair of concepts in chapter 15 of the present book.

Valentin Mudimbe, a famous analyst and critic of African philosophy as a form of intellectual production, has characterised a major division of such writings (those produced by Roman Catholic or post-Catholic intellectuals with a seminary education) as ‘the liberation of difference’ – of the difference that speaking in an African voice does make – in the context of the White-dominated emergent intellectual climate of colonial and early post-colonial Africa, under strong North Atlantic cultural and political hegemony.¹ In order to pinpoint the peculiar handling of historic African cultural and religious material in the context of the intellectual genre of ‘African philosophy’, Mudimbe coined the term *retro-diction* (‘speaking backwards’): African clerical intellectuals like Kagame and Mveng are said to have engaged in retro-diction when they reconstructed and vicariously represented a pre-colonial, pre-Christian African village-based life-world, in which they themselves no longer lived or believed, and which yet was dear to them as a source of inspiration and pride – as an identity recaptured in the face of the North Atlantic rejection of Black people and their powers of thought and agency. In these, in majority francophone, attempts to reconstruct, re-appropriate, and assert a philosophical perspective that is Western in format yet is proclaimed to be pre-colonial African in content, historic² African thought is depicted as revolving on a human-centred ontology, which African authors and sympathetic European observers³ already half a century ago habitually cast in terms of the same Bantu-language root *-ntu* that was later to emerge as the cornerstone of *ubuntu* philosophy.

In Southern Africa the liberation of Black difference through philosophical (as distinct from literary and artistic) production has lagged behind to that in West and East Africa. The adoption of the globally circulating genre of African philosophy by Southern African intellectuals was retarded by the language barrier between English/Afrikaans, on the one hand, and French, on the other; by the relatively late rise to popularity of African philosophy among anglophone intellectuals in the North Atlantic region (including African intellectuals working or studying there); and by the general intellectual isolation in which South Africa was shrouded as a result of the international boycott to which the apartheid state was subjected in the 1970s and especially 1980s.⁴

Ubuntu is a tool for transformation in a context of globalisation. As an *etic* rendering in a globally mediated format, it has emerged, and takes its form and contents, in the realities of post-apartheid South Africa today. The concept of humanity is by definition extremely wide, with many different applications in many

¹ Mudimbe 1997; cf. van Binsbergen 2001a.

² I use this word as an alternative to the worn-out term ‘traditional’ (which yet occasionally filters into my prose), and more or less as a synonym of ‘pre-colonial’, ‘autochthonous’, ‘pre-globalisation’, ‘pre-world-religion’. What is *not* meant by ‘historic’ here is: ‘the *emic* representation of local history’.

³ Cf. Eboussi Boulaga 1968, 1977; Jahn 1958; Kagame 1955; Tempels 1955.

⁴ Needless to add that this international boycott was otherwise highly beneficial in the sense of conducive to the end of minority rule.

different specific contexts. Of these, the current use of the concept of *ubuntu* in South African political and management discourse is likely to be restricted to a few eminently ‘usable’ varieties – usable, not because they betray or deny the past, but because they help to negotiate the future despite the divisiveness of the past and the present. Therefore, looking for the ‘true’ pre-colonial or nineteenth-century meaning of *ubuntu* through etymological, ethnographic and historical procedures would be based on a misunderstanding of what *ubuntu* is, and is meant for. Nonetheless, like most ideologies, *ubuntu* is legitimated by the claim (which in principle amounts to a locutionary statement, open to empirical substantiation or falsification) that this concept sums up the ancestral value orientation of the majority of the Southern African globalised urban population today.

In the works of Southern African writers on *ubuntu*, that concept is presented as a major philosophical achievement, as one of Africa’s great intellectual and moral contributions to humankind as a whole. Here we should distinguish between two points of view:

- (a) the systematic, expert, and loving reconstruction of African systems of thought, and
- (b) the view of culture as integrated and unified,¹ as if organised around one alleged key concept artificially raised to star status – in this case the concept of *ubuntu*.

As a long-standing intellectual endeavour of the greatest value, the pursuit of (a) has been, and will continue to be, one of the important tasks of cultural anthropology, African philosophy and intercultural philosophy. This pursuit depends, for its epistemological acceptability, on explicit, collectively underpinned scholarly procedures whose specific nature is critically defined by the disciplinary community of Africanist researchers, in Africa and elsewhere, in continuous debate. In this process the contribution on the part of African researchers and non-academic sages² is increasingly substantial, and more and more taken into account. The present argument is a contribution to that endeavour. The current *ubuntu* industry, however, has largely resorted to (b): distantly, and without recourse to explicit and systematic methodological and empirical procedures, but instead driven by academic philosophers’ and management consultants’ intuitive linguistic analyses and childhood reminiscences. If *ubuntu* is to be Africa’s great gift to the global world of thought, it is primarily not the African villagers’ gift, but that of the academic and managerial codifiers who allowed themselves to be distantly and selectively inspired by village life: ignoring the ubiquitous conflicts and contradictions, the oppressive immanence of the world view, the witchcraft beliefs and accusations, the constant

¹ For a critique of this notion, cf. chapter 15, and references cited there.

² On the role which some African philosophers attribute to the sage (as distinct from the religious and therapeutic specialist) in African philosophy, cf. Odera Oruka 1990b; for a critical note, cf. chapter 15.

oscillation between trust and distrust, and merely appropriating and representing the bright side.

14.8. Why *ubuntu* can yet be expected to make a difference

Having said this, the major question remains: *Can ubuntu philosophy be expected to bring the positive change advocated in its name? And how would we substantiate our answer to this question?*

Statements of *ubuntu* philosophy suggest that, now the mists of North Atlantic hegemonic subjugation and the ensuing self-censorship have been lifted from the minds of African thinkers, the true African thought can come out in an unadulterated form which, since the urban, modern consumers of such a restated philosophy can largely identify as Africans, will inspire their actions in majority-rule South Africa and Zimbabwe for the better. We have to take considerable distance from this suggestion, without totally dismissing it.

The production of *ubuntu* philosophy is better described in the following terms:

A regional intellectual elite, largely or totally weaned away from the village and kin contexts to which *ubuntu* philosophy explicitly refers, employs a globally circulating and, in origin, primarily North Atlantic format of intellectual production in order to articulate, from a considerable distance, African contents reconstructed by linguistic, ethnographic and other means that are largely unsystematic and intuitive.

‘Liberation of Black difference’ as an expression is not far from the creation of a moral community of people concerned about the present and future of Southern Africa, which in the opening paragraphs of this argument I identified as the obvious goal of the *ubuntu* philosophy. Since most of the forces that have shaped the societies of contemporary Southern Africa can be subsumed under the heading of globalisation, it stands to reason that an intellectual product meant to overcome the negative effects of these forces has to be global in format, even though its contents is largely inspired by the local intimacy of village and kin group. If, in concrete situations of social transformation and conflict, the appeal to *ubuntu* is going to make a positive difference, the global format lends recognition and respectability in ways which the original, implicit normative orientation of contemporary Southern African village and kin situation could never claim in an urban, globalised context. In this respect, the intellectual exponents of *ubuntu* may be said to have created a potentially powerful tool. Since the tool is to be used exhortatively in Southern African situations that are largely globalised, it does not really matter whether the ethnographic and linguistic underpinnings of *ubuntu* philosophy are empirically and epistemologically impeccable in the way they should be if *ubuntu* philosophy were primarily locutionary (an *etic* restatement of *emic* concepts of agency), instead of an exhortative instrument at the service of modern urban society at large. Being prophetic, *ubuntu* philosophy seeks to address fundamental ills in the make-up of urban, globalised Southern Africa: the social life-world of its academic authors. Being utopian, the images of concrete social life featuring in statements of *ubuntu* do not have to correspond to any lived reality anywhere – they are allowed to refer to

‘No-Place’, and to merely depict, through social imagery, desired changes to be brought about by an application of the precepts contained in *ubuntu*.

How then could *ubuntu*, conjuring up images of a viable and intact village society, be expected to make a difference in the utterly globalised context of urban Southern Africa and its conflict-ridden social, industrial, ethnic and political scene? Would not the rural reference, because of its obvious irrelevance in the urban globalised context, annul any advantages that may be derived from the globalised format of *ubuntu* philosophy?

I can see at least three reasons to expect considerable success for *ubuntu*.

One reason I take from the analogy with the initiation rites of girls in contemporary urban Zambia,¹ a social context that (despite its poverty and defective infrastructure) is in many respects comparable to, and continuous with, South Africa and Zimbabwe. These initiation rites are cast in a time-honoured rural idiom revolving on female identity, as underpinned by a detailed knowledge and appreciation of the female body, and a celebration and sacralisation of productive and reproductive capacities, often in forms and with emphasis way out of line with current urban life. One would have expected such rites to decline and disappear, but, on the contrary, they are becoming more and more popular, especially among the middle classes: the construction of female identity with powerful, extremely ancient (probably Late Palaeolithic) symbols is apparently of lasting, major concern even, or especially, in the face of globalisation. *Ubuntu* could serve an analogous purpose.

In the second place, the symbolic technologies offered by local village-based symbols, concepts and practices, be they girls’ initiation rites, *ubuntu*, or otherwise, constitute a form of symbolic empowerment for the very people who (in Zambia in the late 1950s, in Southern Africa in the 1970s and 1980s) fought to attain majority rule and cast off the yoke of North Atlantic cultural and symbolic, as well as political, military and economic, dominance. *Ubuntu* offers the appearance of an ancestral model to them that is credible and with which they can identify, regardless of whether these globalised urban people still observe ancestral codes of conduct (of course in most respects they do not), regardless of whether the ancestral codes are rendered correctly (often they are not).

In the third place, *ubuntu* is especially appealed to when it comes to the settlement of seemingly unsolvable conflicts and insurmountable contradictions – such as massively dominate life in Southern Africa today. Against the background of the anatomy of reconciliation discussed above, *ubuntu*, when appealed to in the modern management of urban and national conflicts, can be effective. But *not* because it summarises the internalised cultural orientations of the Africans involved in such conflict – very far from it, for these Africans are largely globalised in their world view and practices, and are no more governed by village rules and allegiances than people in similar urban and national arenas in other continents. Despite having rural and small-scale face-to-face relationships as its referent, *ubuntu* can be

¹ Rasing 1995, 2001; and chapter 3 of the present book.

effective; in the first place, because it is appreciated as an African thing, but, in the second place, and especially because, despite its globally-derived format, it introduces non-global, particularistic and intimate elements into the very heart of Southern African globalisation. *Ubuntu* can work precisely because it is novel, out of place there where it is most appealed to by modern South African industrial managers, politicians and academics. In the best tradition of reconciliation as innovative sleight of hand (see chapter 11), it allows the conflict regulator to introduce an unexpected perspective to which (for historical, identity and strategic reasons) few parties could afford to say ‘no’.

14.9. Limitations and dangers of *ubuntu*

Ubuntu then appears as a lubricant of social relations at the globalised urban centre of contemporary Southern African society, as a *deus ex machina* offering a way out where little else can. If it helps to overcome otherwise insurmountable contradictions, it produces sociability and alleviates tension. It may do so in situations where avoiding or overcoming the manifestation of open conflict is to the benefit of all parties involved.

When in contemporary South African situations of transition an appeal is made to *ubuntu*, this means in the first place an invocation of the fellow-humanity of all involved in the concrete situation at hand. It is a way of saying:

‘Admittedly, we have so many things that divide us, in terms of age, gender, class, wealth, somatic appearance, cultural style, language, ethnicity, political allegiance; all these identities refer to past experiences which may have been very different and in the course of which the various sets of human beings which make up the present concrete situation may have found themselves in opposite but complementary positions of exploitation, suffering, violence, denial, wrong-doing. It is no use denying these differences and the historical experiences that are tied to them; it is in fact impossible to deny them. Yet, by stressing our common, shared humanity we hope to define a common ground which may help us to find a way out of the impasse which our historical difference have ended us up in.’¹

So far so good. But we hit here on a theoretical danger of *ubuntu*. Use of this term tempts us to deny all other possibilities of identification between Southern African actors (i.e., fellow citizens of the same state, fellow inhabitants of the same local space) except at the most abstract, most comprehensive level of humankind as a whole: as fellow human beings. It is as if in a gathering of humans one appeals to the fundamental unity of all vertebrates, or of all animate beings, instead of resorting to the lower, relatively local, and obviously more effectively binding, category of humans; or as if one addresses the members of one’s family appealing to their shared identity, not as family members, but as fellow-nationals, co-religionists, fellow Africans, or any other category far wider than the comfortably narrow scope of the family. It is, in short, the perplexing and demobilising choice of the wrong level of aggregation. An appeal to *ubuntu* implies that the speaker can see no other grounds

¹ This again is not a quotation but my own vicarious attempt at making the implied argument explicit.

for identification between the locals involved in a given Southern African situation, than their belonging to humankind at large (including the inhabitants of Patagonia, the Ancient Mesopotamians, probably even the Neanderthals), thus implicitly taking for real and insurmountable the divisions of class, somatic appearance, ethnicity, language, gender, religious denomination and political affiliation that – once grotesquely emphasised under the apartheid and colonial state – still enter into any concrete social situation in Southern Africa. Appealing, in any Southern African gathering of local citizens, members of the same local community, the same polity, speaking the same *linguae francae*, having lived through the same traumatic experience of apartheid, enjoying the same benefit of South Africa's restored esteem and economic hegemony among the nations of Africa and the world – appealing, in such a context, merely to a shared humanity, amounts to denying, in effect, the entire moral, historical, informational and cultural *local* texture out of which any nation-state consists, even a traumatised and globalised one like South Africa. It is almost as if apartheid has been victorious, after all.

Moreover, I fear that *ubuntu* would also serve as a lubricant or a pacifier (in the child-care sense) in situations where conflict is real and should not be obscured by smothering it under a blanket of mutually recognised humanity of the parties involved. I shall briefly discuss two such instances: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and continuing class conflict after the attainment of majority rule.

Probably the most widely advertised public application of the concept of *ubuntu* (although the concept itself remained largely implicit in that context) was that of the TRC, which reviewed the crimes against humanity perpetrated under apartheid, and offered the perpetrators re-acceptance into the new South African society at no greater personal cost than admission of guilt and offering of apologies. Here *ubuntu*, from a quality that a person could have or have not, obtained a relational dimension: it became something that one could generously extend to those who had themselves shown (by their less than human behaviour towards their fellow humans) to have too little of it. The semantic field of *ubuntu* came to include '*the perpetrators' restored personhood as granted by the very individual they wronged.*' Underlying this is a concept of reconciliation that is profoundly Christian. It can be no accident that no traditional diviner-priests (guardians of the ancestral world view) participated in the TRC context, where they could have articulated historic Southern African viewpoints on evil, sin, i.e. *not only the possibility but also the limitations of expiation*. In the absence of such experts, the concept of *ubuntu* was to supply what little traditional guidance was allowed to inform the situation. The Black African population of South Africa, having been immensely wronged by White people with a European background, was in the end not even free to define the terms under which it would be prepared to leave this past behind them, and to include regional historic elements of an African culture of justice and expiation among these terms; no, even the terms of reconciliation had to be set by European and White dominance – even if this dominance had the amicable, integrity-exuding and unmistakably Black face of

Archbishop Tutu. The TRC, and the occasional appeal to *ubuntu* in that connection, conveyed the suggestion that unconditional forgiveness and cleansing merely on the basis of a verbal admission of guilt is part of the Southern African ancestral cultural heritage, and who has ever heard of an appeal being made against an ancestral cultural heritage? Such an appeal would place one, to repeat my earlier expression, outside the moral community which the TRC proceedings tried to create and reinforce at all costs. But, as we have seen above when discussing *-ntu* under its socio-legal aspect, it may be misleading to suggest that a Roman–Catholic/Anglican Christian model of confession and absolution epitomises the ancient Southern African world view as subsumed under the concept of *ubuntu*. The perpetrators of atrocities under the apartheid state might qualify as sorcerers and might have been treated accordingly. For such treatment a number of precepts are available, ranging from capital punishment to readmission into the folds of humanity, but the latter at far greater personal costs than just a verbal admission of guilt. This is one major example of how under contemporary conditions *ubuntu* is pressed into service at the centre of national political affairs, in mystifying ways that deny or pervert time-honoured African values, under the pretence of articulating those very values. In years to come South African society may yet have to pay the price for the massive and manipulative repression of resentment and anger caused by the historically questionable use of *ubuntu* in the context of the TRC.

Something similar can be seen in the handling of *ubuntu* in the context of continuing and acerbating class conflict in Southern Africa today. The transformation of Zimbabwe after 1980, and that of South Africa after 1990, has involved a massive reshuffle of social, economic and political power. In both countries, the White–Black contradiction that dominated the decades before majority rule, has resulted in the overthrow of White supremacy, but in most other respects the fundamental relations of inequality were not radically confronted: those between town and country, between land-owners and the landless, between middle classes and the urban poor, between men and women, between the educated and the non-educated, and between the middle-aged and the young. Here *ubuntu* often does serve as a liberating, empowering and identity-building transformative concept in the hands of those who wish to build the country. But it may also be wielded as a mystifying concept in the hands of those who, after the post-apartheid reshuffle, were able personally to cross over to the privileged side of the huge class divide, without being over-sensitive to the wider social costs of their individual economic and status advancement. This process is widely noticeable in South Africa today. It is what people euphemistically call the Africanisation of that country's economic and public sphere. In such a situation of post-apartheid class formation, Africans with widely different access to power resources increasingly confront each other in conflict over scarce resources within industry, formal organisations, neighbourhood affairs, politics. It there not the danger here of *ubuntu* being turned into a populist, mystifying ideology, dissimulating the real class conflict at hand, and persuading the more powerless Blacks involved to yield to the more powerful ones as soon as the

latter wave the flag of *ubuntu*? The newly emerging Black elite seem to be saying to their opponents:

‘How could you, our fellow-Africans, possibly question our decisions? We are merely applying, in yours interest as well as in ours, our most cherished common African ancestral heritage, our *ubuntu*!...’¹

For a Black South African already dropping out of the process of material self-advancement in the post-apartheid era, calling the bluff of such manipulative usage of *ubuntu* would only be asking for further marginalisation. Thus the concept emphatically meant for the restoration of identity and for re-empowerment, risks being deployed against the very people whose ancestral culture it seeks to celebrate.

With a crime rate that is by far the highest in the world, post-apartheid South Africa needs, in addition to the sociability of *ubuntu*, more factual, locutionary, and urban-based tools of self-redress – including a profound commitment to class analysis and gender analysis; an admittance that certain contradictions are simply too real to smother under expressions of sociability and populism; a positive appreciation of legitimate force, even violence (if truly monopolised by a truly democratic state), in the creation and maintenance of socially essential boundaries – boundaries that protect the values they enclose, instead of excluding a majority of people from partaking of those values; and a sustained reflection on the dangers of repressed anger, resentment and grief.

Without the further elaboration stipulated in the previous paragraph, *ubuntu* runs the risk of sinking back to the semantic field where the kindred words *muntu* and *bantu* (as well as the originally Arabic *kaffir*, ‘infidel’) were situated for many decades in South Africa under apartheid: pejorative expressions for financially robbed, easily exploitable, legally unprotected, socially excluded and mentally broken Black subject-hood.

That *ubuntu* carries, in principle, the potential of referring, not to the liberation of Black African difference but to its subjugation to White class interests, and by extension to elite interests in general, became clear to me when in 1999, as a member of a team which also included Mogobe Ramose, Vernie February and the local Roman Catholic pastor, I took part in interviewing a village elder in a rural district about 60 km north of Pretoria. A straightforward translation of the (Nguni) concept of *ubuntu* was impeded by the fact that the conversation was conducted in the Tswana language (where *ubuntu* translates as *botho*). Expecting to trigger, with our magical concept, a full indigenous philosophical account on local values of humanness, our unmistakable ‘sage’ utterly failed to oblige, and instead treated us to a long and shocking story on the history of his village throughout the twentieth century – a history in which *bantu*-hood (for that is another, obvious meaning of the word *ubuntu*) was clearly conceived, in the apartheid sense, as the experience of suffering at the hands of local White self-styled landowners.

This is a usage of the root *-ntu* that was explicitly acknowledged in the beginning of this chapter when setting out that root’s semantic field. I suspect that this meaning continues to adhere, marginally and implicitly, even to the most transformative,

¹ As previous note.

liberating usage of *ubuntu* in modern urban Southern Africa, as an ironical reminder that this concept carries, in the best dialectic (Marx) or deconstructive (Derrida) traditions, the seeds of its own opposite or denial. We must not underrate such a concept's rhetorical and manipulative potential for mystification, counteracting its potential for positive exhortation.

In the light of these moral, humanitarian and political concerns, I may be justified in presenting this critical argument. Probably, for some exponents of *ubuntu* this criticism will expel me, after all, from the moral community for whose creation *ubuntu* philosophy was intended in the first place. Such an expulsion may not quite be in the spirit of the concept of *ubuntu*, but may not be as disastrous as it seems either. Perhaps a moral community constructed, with some explicable success, by *ubuntu*, is not the only moral community that Southern Africa needs in these difficult times. In addition to the entrancing (and often deceptively vulnerable, manipulable and ephemeral) communities created by the articulation of identity, invented tradition, and common humanity (for instance, by an appeal to *ubuntu*), it is no shame to also aspire to membership of the moral community that (in the best radical, Marxist tradition of South African intellectual life) sees the intellectual discharge of solidarity in the explicit, emphatic expression of social contradictions, and not in their dissimulation (as *ubuntu* seeks to do).

14.10. Conclusion: The vindication of *ubuntu* as an escape from violence

However, if I would conclude my argument at this point it would defeat its whole purpose. Certainly, African philosophers theorising about *ubuntu* invite academic criticism simply by their very choice of adopting an academic, globalised format of expression. I have offered such criticism in good faith. In conclusion, though, it is imperative to make explicit, and to neutralise, a number of fundamental dangers, and, if possible, to nip a number of possible misunderstandings in the bud.

Has the purpose of my argument been to humiliate my African colleagues and friends, an arrogant exercise in *Besserwissen* ('narrow-minded and fanatical "knowing better"'), with me going to lengths to reduce to a specific sociology of globalised knowledge the position of the academic authors of *ubuntu* philosophy, whilst at the same time portraying my own knowledge production as informed by timeless, universal scientifically underpinned truth? If that had been my intention I would commit a great injustice, considering the fact that *ubuntu*, while being an academic philosophy emulating a globalised format, is in the first place born out of pain, exclusion, justified anger, and the struggle to regain dignity and identity in the face of Northern conquest and oppression. When I situated the total transformation of Southern African societies under White domination, the need to produce *ubuntu*, and the production of *ubuntu* itself, in a context of globalisation, this globalisation was clearly not a neutral process (not the myth of universal limitless access propagated by liberal proponents of globalisation) but a form of violence. Surely one

does not help erase the effects of such violence by an argument that boils down to more violence from the North, and leave it at that.

One cannot present elements of an anatomy of reconciliation (as I did above) yet end the argument in a formidable contradiction between Southern theoreticians of *ubuntu*, on the one hand, and me as a Northern critic, on the other. Therefore, let us go one step further and admit the amazing similarities that exist between these two parties. The reader has been looking in on a frank, dogged, at times heated, conversation between members of the same family, who have grown up without totally casting off the irritations they caused each other when still children, yet know that they are irrevocably inseparable, produced by a shared history. If the format of the *ubuntu* philosophy (and of all African philosophy, for that matter) is globalised and alien to the village and kinship matters it tries to explicate – so is the format of the present argument, of intercultural philosophy, and of ethnography. The same paradox applies to both sides: that of being, at the same time, inevitably and fundamentally distortive, and yet constituting a serious and valuable interpretation carried by the quest for integrity. If the relationship between the theoreticians of *ubuntu*, and the peripheral situations they try to represent, are distant, strained, contradictory, vicarious, yet intimate and legitimate – so is the relationship between the present writer and the communities of Southern African communities of which he is a part-time member. If globalisation produced Southern African intellectuals, including the theoreticians of *ubuntu*, so it produced social anthropologists and caused them to insert themselves into Southern African peripheral communities. If the production of *ubuntu* philosophy is prophetic and utopian, so – as I admitted explicitly above – is my own stance in this argument. If the theoreticians of *ubuntu* produce a Grand Narrative, so are other Grand Narratives hovering over my own side of the argument: the idea that scientific ethnography produces valid knowledge, and the idea that one can place oneself outside the course of hegemonic history by identifying closely with the peripheral victims of that history. If the theoreticians of *ubuntu* readily oscillate between perlocutionary blueprints and locutionary factual description of village and family situations, so do I oscillate between, on the one hand, an hermeneutical reading of my own predicaments as a post-ethnographer, and, on the other (*vis-à-vis* the *ubuntu* theoreticians), a critical stance that cannot possibly be hermeneutical but amounts to ideological critique. The precarious nature of the relationship between *ubuntu* theoreticians and Southern African villages has everything to do with the history of Northern violence and cultural destruction, which has produced globalised African intellectuals, but at the double cost of expelling them from a local home of meaningfulness, and of nearly destroying these homes anyway. For a European professional anthropologist, the step of becoming a Southern African diviner-priest, as well as the step of becoming the adoptive son of King Kahare Kabambi of the Nkoya people (my two main credentials when – however uncertainly and unconvincingly – posing as more or less a local to Southern African affairs), do both manifest the same commitment to countering the course of Southern African history which is also at the root of *ubuntu* philosophy.

The contradictions underlying my argument on *ubuntu* are reminiscent of the tension between the critique of ideology, on the one hand, and the championing of tradition, on the other, as brought out in the famous debate between Gadamer and Habermas in the 1960s and 1970s.¹ The remarkable point in the case of *ubuntu* is that both sides (the academic *ubuntu* philosophers, and I myself) display these contradictions not only in their interaction with the other side, but also in themselves. For the *ubuntu* philosophers break a lance for tradition, but at the same time engage in the critique of ideology when exposing the ills of globalisation; alternatively, I exercise the critique of ideology when I expose the *ubuntu* philosophers' appeal to Southern African tradition as nostalgic, distant, and cast in a globalised academic format, but, at the same time, I feel justified in playing the role of mouthpiece of that same tradition when explicitly identifying myself as a *sangoma* – which is not only a traditional role, but whose very task it is to articulate the ancestral tradition, and draw his suffering clients back to it.

The point is not whether my part-time membership of Southern African peripheral communities has created a setting where, through the skilful application of the professional empirical procedures of state-of-the-art ethnography, more valid knowledge is being produced than by the introspection, childhood memories, linguistic reflection and occasional rural visits of the theoreticians of *ubuntu*. On the contrary, the very idea of such superiority would mean that we are still blind to the power implications of launching, and contesting, *ubuntu*. Claiming an ethnographically underpinned superior insight simply means yet more Northern violence, inviting Southern counter-violence. The point is this: Any social situation in which one truly, existentially takes part, breeds, through the experience of such participation, a subjective reality from which one cannot and will not distance oneself. My 'insights' into the peripheral Southern African situations that I have lived intensively and for a long time, are inescapably true to me, not because I applied state-of-the-art ethnographic techniques in those settings and therefore feel justified (although I am not) to lay claim to epistemologically validated truth for my ethnographic pronouncements – no, they are (subjectively) true in the first place because they are me, because I constitute myself as a person on the basis of those experiences, because I am not in the least prepared to suffer the self-destruction that a relative stance vis-à-vis these experiences would entail. Exactly the same mechanism informs the situation of the *ubuntu* theoreticians: their pronouncements on the essential African village before, or outside the reach of, Northern destruction are true, not for procedural epistemological reasons but because such pronouncements sum up their uncompromising personal identity constituted out of the experiences of exclusion, humiliation, anger and contestation.

It is not mutually exclusive, monopolistic claims to truth and sanity (and the attending responses in terms of ideological critique, and psychoanalysis), but

¹ Gadamer 1965, 1967a; Habermas 1967, 1968, 1970, 1977; Ricoeur 1981.

differences of interests,¹ that divide the participants in this argument's conversation on *ubuntu*. And these interests are not primarily academic status and honour, nor struggles over the right to officiate on African philosophy, nor struggles over a birthright, but the most essential interest of not being destroyed by the implications of the other's self-construction.

If I am not mistaken, *ubuntu* contains an effective precept for the management of such a vital interest: the secret of the village headman's skill who, while lacking all formal sanctions, yet through the imaginative power of reconciliation manages to safeguard the conflicting interests of the members of his little community, without destroying any of them. But those who have lived Southern African village life also know that these subtle and eminently constructive skills often go unappreciated when running counter to the individual village member's short-term self-interests, and then a rumour of sorcery readily attaches to the incumbent of the headmanship, of all people.

Ultimately, then, this conversation about *ubuntu* revolves on the question of *how to avoid or domesticate violence*: the violence that is produced by text (the texts of African philosophy, intercultural philosophy, Africanist ethnography); the violence that is produced by representation (by intellectuals, of aspects of human life that are lost to them or that never were theirs in the first place); the violence that is produced by the formal organisation (of academic disciplines, their validity-underpinning epistemological procedures, and the built-in rivalry between their members; of the colonial state; of the capitalist economy); the violence that is produced by globalisation as a vehicle of all the above. Seen in this light, the concept of *ubuntu* is historically determined to constitute a bone of contention, to remind us of past violence and to lead us into new violence, until we realise that, above all, *ubuntu* is the invitation to confront this determination and, together, rise above such violence. Only then can our work, on or about *ubuntu*, benefit the poor and powerless people of Southern Africa, with whom the theoreticians of *ubuntu* clearly identify even more than I do.

¹ Cf. Habermas 1970.

‘Cultures do not exist’

Exploding self-evidences in the investigation of interculturality

to Richard Fardon

15.1. Introduction

When upon Heinz Kimmerle’s retirement in 1995 the chair of intercultural philosophy at the philosophical faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, fell vacant and the post was advertised, candidates were examined in the light of two major requirements: a sound knowledge of at least one non-European ‘culture’, and acquaintance with the Western philosophical tradition. As an anthropologist with extensive fieldwork experience in five African situations,¹ I, for one, can claim the first point, but precisely that relative expertise has inspired the provocative title of this chapter, originally delivered as my inaugural lecture when I succeeded Kimmerle. In the modern world, ‘cultures do not exist’ (any more), I will argue. Not so much in order to render the designation of the chair on intercultural philosophy inherently problematic (for surely if cultures do not exist, the adjective ‘intercultural’ as characterisation of a branch of philosophy cannot have any meaning), but in order to indicate the hand luggage² that I shall take with me to Philosophers’ Land. This hand luggage comprises

- first, insights that have been gathered in empirical research and which intercultural philosophy ought to take to heart; but also, secondly,
- philosophical problems that have been largely ignored in the context of cultural anthropology’s empiricism which for over a century has constituted the main mode of producing allegedly valid intercultural knowledge in academia.

This indicates the tension currently characterising my work. I have recently given up my chair in the social sciences for one in philosophy, but clearly I am not (yet) a philosopher – I continue to have difficulty reproducing and articulating ideas

¹ Rural Tunisia, urban Zambia, rural Zambia, rural Guinea-Bissau, and urban Botswana.

² Van Binsbergen & Doornbos 1987.

that seem to be self-evident to every philosopher, and I think I detect insurmountable problems in philosophical texts which to philosophers appear to be particularly well argued.

The structure of my argument is as follows. To begin with, I shall indicate how the concept of 'culture' has taken root as a key concept in our contemporary social experience and in philosophy. Precisely because it has done so, it is of the greatest importance to subject such self-evidences as attach to 'culture' to empirical and philosophical scrutiny. Now more than ever, the process of globalisation has brought together within a common political space a plurality of self-reflexive and militant identities; as this text is being finalised for the press, the truth of this statement is driven home by the violence against military and civilian targets in the USA on 11 September, 2001, by Middle Eastern Muslims holding just such a diabolical enemy image of the USA as the Americans do of them. *An adequate analysis of this kind of situation will be of decisive importance for the fate of humanity in the first centuries of the third millennium CE.* As a next step, I shall explore the conditions under which my claim that 'cultures do not exist' may acquire meaningfulness. Since, in this connection, I put forth the social sciences as an example for philosophy, I am compelled to discuss the place of empirical knowledge within philosophy. I shall stress that intercultural philosophy ought to take into account such knowledge as the empirical sciences have gathered through explicit and well-tried methods; and here I am thinking particularly of the empirical discourse on African ethnicity, and of the neo-diffusionist arguments in favour of extensive cultural connections in space and time informing Africa's cultural history and its place in the world as a whole. But, as a next step, I shall argue – by reference to my own complex itinerary through Africanist cultural anthropology – how this particular empirical science, despite its unmistakable relevance for intercultural philosophy, is yet so philosophically naïve, and so disposed towards a North Atlantic epistemological perspective, that cultural anthropology can at best constitute a mere point of departure for our theoretical explorations of interculturality. Finally, I posit that intercultural mediation ideally situates itself beyond any specific cultural orientation, which allows me to characterise intercultural philosophy as the search for a transgressive and innovative, metacultural medium for the production of knowledge. It is the quest itself which makes this a commendable undertaking, even though its metacultural goal is unlikely to be ever reached.

15.2. 'Cultures' in contemporary society

Ever since the end of the eighteenth century CE, in Western scholarship and subsequently in North-Atlantic society as a whole, the concept of 'culture' has developed to acquire such great self-evidence that it has almost assumed a transcendental nature; in the latter respect therefore the concept of culture has come to be somewhat comparable to time, space, causality and substance – which in Kant's philosophy are the basic categories utilised by human thought but not derived

from sensory perception.¹ Appropriated by the wider society, the concept of 'culture' combines claims of totality, unicity, integration, boundedness, and non-performativity. According to this conception, human beings at any one moment in time have, not a plurality of intersecting 'cultural orientations' co-existing simultaneously, but just one 'culture', and in that 'culture' they live their entire lives as if they have no option, as if displaying the distinctive features that mark them as adherents of that culture are free from ostentatiousness and from strategically calculated effect upon their social environments – in other words, free from performativity. The claim that such an allegedly unitary culture forms an integrated whole, springs forth from two kind of considerations:

- people's assumption that, as far as human individuals are concerned, whatever is cultural, is the attribute of *one (allegedly integrated) individual personality*;
- 'culture' produces a meaningful world, that is to say, produces the illusion of a self-evidence that can only exist by virtue of the fact that no manifest limitations and boundary conditions are imposed upon that self-evidence in the consciousness of the bearer of that culture; for the sake of maintaining that illusion of self-evidence, of a self-evident universe contained in, and implied by, 'a culture', such a 'culture' has to be holistic (i.e. geared to a totality, a whole), and by consequence is implicitly intolerant of diversity.

In the last analysis we are dealing here with an implicit claim to universality made by the individual for her 'culture'. This mechanism was already recognised by Kant when he claimed that whoever considers something beautiful, takes it for granted that it would be beautiful to anyone.²

Moreover the above, unitary concept of 'culture' implies the assumption (and here lies the link with ethnicity) that this one 'culture' can be adequately designated by means of an ethnonym: '*Dutch culture*', '*Chinese culture*', 'the culture of the *Zambian Nkoya*, of the *Nigerian Yoruba*, of the *South African Zulu*', and so one. This produces the classic image that anthropologists have by now largely discarded, but that still has wide circulation outside anthropology: the image of Africa as a gaudy patchwork quilt of fundamentally different 'cultures', each of which constitutes an integrated, bounded totality. Nor is this conception of 'culture' limited to that of a merely descriptive category for the human situation: in contemporary public culture, the use of the concept of 'culture' has come to be closely associated with ethical and political judgements based on whether or not the person so judged shows respect for someone else's 'culture'

What does it mean if someone insists that others should show respect for her own 'culture'? It means more or less what follows. In a concrete interaction situation,

¹ Kant 1983c.

² Kant 1983b; Cf. Kimmerle & Oosterling 2000; of my contribution to the latter book, chapter 9 of the present book is a revised version. It reflects on Kant's aesthetics in the light of an empirical African example.

where a person seeks to reinforce her claims to scarce resources (such as prestige, the right to vote, a residence permit, access to the markets of housing, education, employment, the liberties listed in catalogues of human rights), that person may explicitly appeal to a certain idea that has already been privileged by public opinion, and by bureaucratic and political practices and regulations. This is the idea that a person, not by her own free choice but by a determination in her innermost essence and totality, represents not only a universal but also a specific (notably *cultural*, or ‘ethnic’) mode of being human, a mode that she has in common with only a (usually quite small) small *sub*-section of humanity, on the grounds of a history shared with the other members of that sub-section, and expressed through practices specific to that sub-section as acquired through a learning process (for example speaking a common language).

In this insistence on respect a number of heterogeneous elements come together in the most surprising way: totality, essentialism, pluralism, the definition and structuring of the public space as multicultural, political strategy, and performativity. The respect claim expresses a conception according to which ‘culture’ represents a person’s total commitment, constituting the essence of that person. ‘Culture’ becomes the central identity; and like other identities, it legitimates itself by means of the construction of a subject that claims, with Luther:

‘Here I stand, I have no option.’

Interestingly, the person in question can only exhort others to respect his own ‘culture’, by himself taking a distance for his cultural existence, objectivating the latter and making it a topic of conversation. And such a distancing makes one aware of the cultural and ethnic otherness of others, of the accidental, contingent, nature of one’s own cultural and ethnic identity, as if one had, in fact, an option to end up with a different identity.¹

This lends a double layer of performativity to the respect claim: that claim is explicitly performed within the public space,² on the basis of a conscious distancing from the self; while the self has wanted, effected, perceived, and evaluated, the effect which that claim has on other people. In the contemporary world the convincing, *public stance of authenticity and integrity* (which in itself is performative and therefore inherently self-defeating) is indispensable in order to render *strategic identity claims* successful – in order to gain recognition.

The respect claim displays a typical contradiction of postmodern North Atlantic society: whatever is introduced, in a strategic and performative manner, into the public arena is no longer allowed to be explicitly discussed in terms of strategy and performativity; on the contrary, public opinion, pressures towards political correctness (i.e. social etiquette), and even formal socio-legal rules (anti-discrimination legislation) are conducive to a situation where in public-arena expressions these

¹ Cf. Mall 1995: 92. See however my discussion of Mall’s view, chapter 12.

² Notably that of the ‘politics of recognition’; cf. Taylor 1992.

elements are explicitly referred to in terms of 'authenticity'. The concept of 'culture' (as a thinking in terms of 'cultures', plural) embodies this contraction. It is not a sign of bad faith. On the contrary, this contradiction is inevitable given contemporary conditions. Constituting itself by reference to 'culture', self-identity is always and inevitably situated in a field of tension between self-evidence and performativity. Thus the concept of 'culture' offers a contemporary solution for the perennial problem of society: how to negotiate the tension between individual and community. This makes 'culture' one of the principal empowering concepts at the disposal of political actors in the local, national and global arenas of our time.

The great attraction of this concept of 'culture' turns out to lie precisely in its capability of encompassing and concealing *contradictions*.

A social-science readership, in the present post-Marxist era, would be likely to realise that here I am referring to a formal, highly abstract conception of society, and of any social institution, relationship, situation and event, not as a structure or flow of concrete objects and persons but as a bundling of contradictions. A philosophical readership however might have to be specifically alerted to such a sociological view. Of course, the contradiction as a model of thought is a precondition for dialectics and has a splendid pedigree in mainstream philosophy. Yet philosophers (with the exception of post-structuralists and Marxists) may be inclined to consider the articulation of contradictions not an end in itself (as it would be for the anthropologist describing the formal abstract structure of a ritual in terms of contradictions between generations, genders, modes of production, conceptions of power and legitimacy, etc.), but as a stepping-stone towards the rational threshing out of these contradictions: if not in some Hegelian synthesis then at least in the elegance of academic prose.

How then does the concept of 'culture' deal with social contradictions? It offers the possibility of defining a central identity within which a person's many identities as the player of many social roles can be rearranged within a hierarchical framework – which relegates the majority of these identities to a state of being secondary, unessential, invisible, while at the same time reaffirming (in a sense that I consider utterly artificial and performative) the *cultural* identity as that person's deepest essence. This identity is supposed to define not just a partial aspect of an individual's life, not one specific role, but a total life-world, whose parts hang together meaningfully and organically, have their place within the ensemble – resulting in a situation where the subject can confront the world as if that subject were a monolithic whole, and can find meaning and order in that world. The awareness of such a central and holistic cultural identity is not innate but is explicitly constructed in social communication (in other words, is learned), which often goes hand in hand with the cherishing of a collective historical experience and of selective culturally distinctive features; often also ethnic and cultural mobilisation by an elite is part of the process through which such a cultural identity is being constructed. Nevertheless the actors involved tend to succeed in representing this construction, not as the deliberate human creation of something that was not there in the first place, but as a mere

taking consciousness of what allegedly had always been a person's deepest and innermost essence. Such a construction is in line with modernity's dominant collective representations: the unified, undivided, individual *subject*, and its *identity*. 'Culture' as a universally accepted term in North Atlantic society is a thought machine designed to turn subjectively the fragmentation, disintegration and performativity of the modern experience, into unity, coherence, and authenticity. Thus, the illusion of self-evidence and integrity are somehow saved in postmodern times when everyone knows that nothing is self-evident any more nor possesses integrity, and that autonomous subject and identity are illusory constructs.

In its insistence on an essential, authentic otherness, and in its dissimulation of performativity, this conception of 'culture' lands us with a huge social problem: it takes for granted, and even rejoices, in the presumed absolute difference alleged to exist between a plurality of positions, and hence freezes the public space to a snake-pit of absolute contradictions, where opposition may persist to the point of mortal combat. The decreased liveability of contemporary society may be attributed, to a certain extent, to the ever greater impregnability of an ever greater number of cultural fortresses. Only a few decades ago cultural relativism was simply an expression of the anti-hegemonic, anti-Eurocentric critique of imperialism and colonialism.¹ But now it risks becoming a nightmare: a licence to reduce contemporary society to an immovable stalemate of positions between which, on theoretical grounds, no open communication, identification, community or reconciliation is possible any longer; and violence remains as the only way out. However, as the Chinese philosopher Vincent Shen has rightly argued,² such insistence on irresolvable differences (however much a respectable philosophical position since Nietzsche) is insufficient as a survival strategy for the modern world: in order for us to be able to face the future, we need dialogue, exchange, compromise, between the positions that have been occupied in the name of 'culture'. Intercultural philosophy is nothing but an exploration of the possibilities that exist on this point. Intercultural philosophy, therefore, has a prophetic function, not in the derived sense of foretelling the future, but in the original (Greek and biblical) sense of uninvitedly speaking to contemporary society about its ills, predicaments and alternatives, while invoking a transcendent value or being.

¹ For formulations of classic cultural relativism, cf. Herskovits 1973; Nowell-Smith 1971; Rudolph 1968; Tennekes 1971. Also cf. Witherspoon 1981. In many respects, the problematic of cultural relativism is the mirror image of the problematic of interculturality; the field is too complex than to expect that justice will be done to it in the present, limited context. For an interesting exploration, cf. Procée 1991. Around Gellner an important group of critics of cultural relativism has formed, cf. Aya 1996; Boudon 1996; Gellner 1996. Also cf. the exchange between Geertz and Gellner: Geertz 1994; Gellner 1994; and Geertz 1984.

² Shen, in preparation.

15.3. The background of the concept of 'culture' in cultural anthropology and philosophy

15.3.1. Culture in cultural anthropology

What is the origin of this concept of 'culture'? It has a variegated history but its most common meaning is the popularisation of a cultural anthropological concept that, in that form, was only coined as recently as 1871 by Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture*.¹ Tylor defines 'culture' as:

'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.'

A century earlier, with Herder,² 'culture' merely encompassed the so-called higher and public forms of human achievement (religion, art, science, constitutional arrangements); Herder's merit was, however, that he included the peoples outside Europe among those having a measure of 'culture', showing himself surprisingly anti-ethnocentric in this respect.³ Tylor's breakthrough was to go beyond 'high culture' to include, in his definition of culture, everything that was not given to man by nature, but of which he partakes as a member of a human group.

Tylor's was not the last word. From 1900 onwards, in the United States and Great Britain, prolonged participant observation, carried by mastery of the local language, emerged as the principal empirical tool in cultural anthropology. This means that for the first time one had at one's disposal abundant and convincing contemporary data on which to base an analysis geared to the distinctions and the meanings that the people under study applied in their own world view – an analysis that was *emic* in the sense of Pike's paired concepts of *emic* and *etic* as propounded in the 1950s.

The paired concepts of *emic* and *etic* express the distinction between an internal structuring of a cultural orientation such as is found in the consciousness of its bearers, on the one hand, and, on the other, a structuring that is imposed from the outside. *Etic* has nothing to do with ethics in the sense of the philosophy of the judgement of human action in terms of good and evil. Pike's terminology is based on a linguistic analogy. In linguistics one approaches the description of speech sounds from two complementary perspectives: that of phonetics (hence *-etic*), which furnishes a purely external description, informed by anatomical and physical

¹ Tylor 1871.

² Herder n.d.

³ This does not, however, exonerate him from charges of racism, which in recent debates have been levelled against not only Herder, but also Kant (in his non-critical, anthropological work) and other Enlightenment philosophers; cf. Eze 1996, 1997b; Bernal 1987; Rose 1990; Kant 1983e. However, these allegations have met with forceful defences of the Enlightenment philosophers as pillars of universalism and tolerance: Palter 1996b; Norton 1996; Jenkyns 1996. The truth is that, while unmistakably, and forgivably, children of their time and age and hence racists, they were often (like Herder in much of his writings, and Kant in his critical work), and to their great credit, able to rise above these limitations.

parameters, revolving on the air vibrations of which the speech sounds consist; and the perspective of phonology, whose basic unit of study is the phoneme (adj. phonemic, hence *-emics*): the smallest unit of speech sound that is effectively distinguished by language users competent in a particular language, basing themselves on the distinctive features of that speech sound. The phonetic features of actually produced speech sounds is subject to endless variation that can be registered by any observer and by whatever acoustic apparatus, regardless of competence in the particular language in question. By contrast, every spoken language has only a very limited range of phonemes (usually only a couple of dozen). Language users classify the infinite variety of actually produced speech sounds according to the elements of this series of recognised phonemes, and thus determine which words or sentences, consisting of several phonemes, are at hand in a particular situation.¹

Pike thus codified the two-stage analytical stance (both *etic* and *emic*) of the classic anthropology that had emerged in the second quarter of the twentieth century with such proponents as Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Griaule and Leiris. Before this development, anthropology had been dominated by analysis in terms of externally imposed analytical schemes (the *etic* approach) such as evolutionism, diffusionism, materialism, theories concerning the fixed and universal phases of aesthetic development, etc. The rise of fieldwork and of an *emic* perspective meant that the empirical horizon of individual studies contracted greatly. *Emic* analysis required that one learned a new language and stayed on the spot for years. Such an investment, and the analysis based upon it, could only take place within a very narrow spatial and temporal horizon: that horizon which the fieldworker could cover by her own individual action – an area of at most a few thousand square kilometres and usually very much smaller, situated in a limited period of time that for the duration of the fieldwork and writing-up was even frozen into a stereotypicalised ‘ethnographic present’. *Gone were the days, in cultural anthropology, of searching for extensive connections in space and time.* The ethnographic monograph became the standard format of anthropological knowledge production, the ethnographer and her book came to identify with the name of the group under study, with the ethnonym. The idea arose that each such a monograph amounted to the description of ‘a culture’. Presumably there would be about as many ‘cultures’ as there were ethnographic monographs, and each ‘culture’ would be effectively conceived after the model of the book: bounded, internally integrated, consistent, unique – a whole that is well described with the term ‘holistic’. It became the anthropologist’s task to seek entrance to an ‘other culture’,² conceived as a total, bounded, integrated and non-performative form of human existence – as a nearly impregnable fortress. Until quite recently, this view has determined the pathos and the rhetoric of fieldwork and ethnography. Henceforth, not only our vision of continents outside Europe, but also

¹ Cf. Headland, Pike & Harris 1990; cf. Harris 1969, chapter 20, pp. 568-604 who was seriously criticised by Burling 1969; Müller 1983.

² Cf. Beattie 1964.

the anthropologist's individual career was to be organised around the ethnographic standard monograph. Cultural relativism became the operative term for the respect that anthropologists, and the outside world, owed to this fieldwork-related celebration of distinctive otherness. Its emergence no doubt had to do with the way in which individual anthropologists positioned themselves on the North Atlantic academic market of intercultural knowledge: as monopolists peddling their own unique knowledge of the reified culture where they had done individual fieldwork.

In another way cultural relativism was also instigated by the practice of fieldwork. On the one hand, fieldwork, as an *emic* activity, claims the most far-reaching intersubjectivity between fieldworker and host population; but, on the other hand, it is a lonely and unique experience that essentially escapes external critical assessment and hence among fellow-professionals is scarcely conducive to an intersubjectivity based on shared external analytical (i.e. *etic*) abstraction from the local culture under study. For this methodological dilemma the dogma of cultural relativism has offered a safety net: under the aegis of cultural relativism it became ideologically impossible, in professional anthropological circles, to express doubt about the specific pronouncements of ethnographers; for since fellow professionals lacked the prolonged personal experience with the local ethnographic context under study, such doubt could only be based on the *etic* extrapolation of connections that had merely been established for another 'culture' by applying an *emic* analysis specific to that other 'culture' Henceforth the professional stance of anthropologists would be a combination of intradisciplinary avoidance¹ *in academia*, among anthropological colleagues, combined with the myth of such limitless communication in the field as could yield a comprehensive and allegedly valid view of the local 'culture' under investigation in the field. Anthropological restudies of the same community by different fieldworkers have demonstrated² that this methodological dilemma is virtually without solution, a state of affairs that casts severe doubt on anthropology's claims of constituting a scientific discipline.

Whoever took up the academic study of cultural anthropology in the Netherlands in the early 1960s, still had to learn the anthropological definition or definitions of culture as an unmistakably technical term, as a far from obvious addition to the common vocabulary³ with which one had left secondary school. But in the course of the four decades that have since elapsed, the concept of culture has spread worldwide (not only among the western Indo-European languages, but also outside) to become one of the most frequently used and taken-for-granted terms by which to express the contemporary world, its variety, and especially its conflicts. The concept

¹ I am deliberately using the anthropological technical term 'avoidance', as defined in chapter 1.

² Van Beek 1991; Kloos 1987; Lewis 1951; Harris 1969.

³ How fast the social appropriation of the concept of 'culture' has proceeded in recent decades is manifest, for instance, from the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* of 1978 (Little *et al.* 1978), where 'culture' still only occurs in the sense of religious worship (first attested in English in 1483), agriculture (1626), and civilising activity (1510, 1805). Little *et al.* 1978 *s.v.* 'culture'.

of culture was transformed from an academic technical term to a self-evident, common societal concept that nowadays is on the lips of almost all social actors regardless of their class or education. This transformation is closely related to the rise, in the last quarter of the twentieth century within the North Atlantic society, of a migrant population that stood out both in terms of geographical origin and of somatic characteristics. Another major factor of this transformation has been the cultural globalisation of our daily life, as the result of new techniques of communication and information that led among other effects to frequent displacements across great distances. More than ever before, it is evident that no cultural situation is homogeneous, that no culture exists in isolation, and that cultural specificity can only occur by virtue of a local, parochial boundary maintenance¹ in the face of an expanding, worldwide field of locally available and perceived cultural alternatives.

15.3.2. Culture in philosophy

Today not only social scientists and historians, but also philosophers frequently utilise the concept of ‘culture’; it is even one of the two constituent lexical elements in the expression ‘intercultural philosophy’, whose foundations my Rotterdam chair seeks to investigate. It is remarkable to what great extent philosophers (who usually are very critical in their use of concepts) have taken concepts such as ‘culture’, ‘cultures’, ‘cultural specificity’ and ‘interculturality’ for granted, as self-evident – as if the human condition could not be thought otherwise but in terms of a plurality, of a ‘multiversum’, of ‘cultures’.²

The following is a possible, perhaps even obvious, definition of ‘intercultural philosophy’ that remains so close to everyday language use that it takes on board the entire loading of ‘culture’ as a pre-scientific societal concept used by general actors in the modern world:

taking as its point of departure the existence, side by side, of a plurality of mutually distinct ‘cultures’, intercultural philosophy investigates the conditions under which an exchange can take between two or more different ‘cultures’, especially an exchange under such aspects as knowledge production of one culture about another; tolerance or intolerance; conflict or co-operation in the economic, social and political domain.³

In a more specific form of the above, we would conceive of intercultural philosophy as the search for a *philosophical intermediate position* where specialist philosophical thought seeks to escape from its presumed determination by any specific distinct ‘culture’. The following has been a common path along which

¹ The Belgian intercultural philosopher Libbrecht, originally a Sinologist, has stressed the constructedness of cultural boundaries eloquently and designed a sophisticated comparative model for intercultural philosophy in which this though is applied particularly to East Asian material; Libbrecht 1995a, 1995b, 1999.

² Some examples from among countless many are: Appiah 1992; Copleston 1980; Gyekye 1997a; Kimmerle 1994a; Mall 1995; Sogolo 1998; the latter article is an excerpt from: Sogolo 1993.

³ Cf. Mall 1995, chapter 1; Mall 1993.

philosophers have sought to effect such an escape: we render explicit the traditions of thought peculiar to a number of cultures, and we subsequently explore the possibilities of cross-fertilisation between these traditions of thought. By doing so, the emphasis is not on the philosophical enunciation of such intercultural practices in which non-philosophers are involved, but on the philosophical practice itself; and the central issue to be problematised is not the fact (or the illusion, see the final section of this chapter) of communication across cultural boundaries, but a comparison of conceptual contents on either side of such boundaries – as if intercultural communication in itself is a given that may already be taken for granted. Under the heading of ‘non-western’ or ‘comparative’ philosophy such a form of intercultural philosophy is frequently engaged in, but – to my mind – prematurely so, as long as the central concept of ‘interculturality’ (i.e. the fact, the conditions, and effects of communication across cultural boundaries) has been insufficiently analysed in its own right. It is as if we concentrate all our efforts on seeking to determine the coat pattern resulting from a cross between a zebra and a giraffe, without asking the question of whether such a cross could ever produce viable offspring in the first place.

In the more specifically ‘comparative-philosophy’ approach to interculturality, philosophers also tend to take their cue from a concept of ‘culture’ that is holist in nature, assuming an existential cultural identity that is the opposite of performative; such a concept coincides with the concept of ‘culture’ circulating in the wider society, which because of its built-in contradictions is directly linked to social power relations and ideological mystification. Thus the philosopher risks becoming the slave or the mouthpiece of his own society, at the very moment when he seeks to think away from the latter’s cultural structuring, and to apply a comparative perspective. Genuinely philosophical analysis would, on the contrary, consist of the attempt to expose terms that have become self-evident and are taken for granted, and to replace them – with good and explicit reasons – by other terms that are likely to offer new insights, since they are detached from the societal tissue of power and ideology, for instance as neologisms which never had that kind of social embedding in the first place.

Meanwhile it is easily understood why intercultural philosophers, of all people, have borrowed the concept of ‘culture’ from cultural anthropology. Let us consider these reasons now.

15.3.3. Philosophers against philosophical ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism

In the first place, the concept of ‘culture’, with its implied cultural relativism, offered philosophers the possibility to take a critical distance from Eurocentrism¹ and ethnocentrism as characteristics of the mainstream of Western philosophy from Hegel to

¹ Since the nineteenth century CE, Eurocentrism has taken a North Atlantic variant which comprises not only western Europe but also North America.

Rorty and the French post-structuralist philosophers. Hegel's ethnocentrism and his contempt of Africa have been well documented.¹ Rorty's ethnocentrism is evident, conscious, and he shows it off.² The reproach of ethnocentrism is laid at the doorstep of the French post-structuralists – Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault – by Rattansi.³ Nonetheless the latter allows himself to be largely inspired by their work for his Post-colonial Theory of racism, feminism and North Atlantic hegemony. Foucault travelled widely, held (or was considered for) intercontinental appointments, yet (with the exception of his notes on the Iranian revolution of 1978) in his philosophical and historical analyses almost completely limited himself to the North Atlantic region; this however did not prevent him from profoundly inspiring thinkers with a background and identity outside the North Atlantic region, as is clear from Mudimbe's seminal *The Invention of Africa* (1988) – an emphatically Foucaultian book, although it is firmly based on the early Foucault and overlooks the developments in the latter's work after the 1960s.⁴ To the French philosophers mentioned by Rattansi we might add Deleuze and Guattari. In their work, the exotic Other is repeatedly appropriated, in the most stereotypical fashion, merely in order to add further contrast to these authors' statements concerning their own, North Atlantic, postmodern cultural orientations. At the same time, worldwide cultural diversity, and the intellectual problems which it poses, mainly feature in their work in a local and domesticated form: to the extent to which, over the last few decades, France itself has become a multicultural society. But we must also grant to Deleuze and Guattari what Rattansi had to grant to those French post-structuralists he does discuss: in principle their work contains the starting point for a non-ethnocentric theorising of processes of globalisation, identity and signification.⁵

These are only signs of a changing tide, however. Until recently the Western philosopher implicitly took for granted that there is one, self-evident, social and cultural context (the North Atlantic one), and one self-evident language (his own). The twentieth century CE, especially, has seen a very great investment in the philosophical articulation of language⁶ and of social and cultural identity. Yet the philosophical investigation of interaction between *two or more* cultural and social contexts, *two or more* languages, is still in its infancy. Not only interculturality, but also interlinguality is a relatively underdeveloped aspect of mainstream Western philosophy. Philosophical approaches to interlinguality (concerning such topics as translation from one language into the other, and as the ethnographic representation

¹ Hegel 1992; for a critical distance from the perspective of contemporary intercultural philosophy, cf. Kimmerle 1993; also Eze 1996, 1997b.

² For striking relevant passages, cf. Rorty 1997; also cf. section 12.1 of the present book.

³ Rattansi 1994.

⁴ Mudimbe 1988, 1992c; cf. my extensive study of Mudimbe, van Binsbergen 2001a.

⁵ Deleuze *c.s.* 1980; Deleuze & Guattari 1972, 1980, 1991; Guattari 1992; Oosterling & Thisse 1998; van Binsbergen 1999g.

⁶ For an authoritative overview cf. Hale & Wright 1999.

of concepts and representations embedded in a different cultural orientation) have been relatively rare¹ and, what is more important, have not been accorded the central place in today's mainstream Western philosophy that they deserve.² In the contemporary world at large, under conditions of globalisation, problems of communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries are of vital political, economic, social and artistic importance. The ecological survival of humankind and the avoidance of a Third and probably final World War (over issues of race, ethnicity, the definition of such fundamental concepts as freedom, truth, legitimacy, personhood and the supernatural, economic hegemony, and North–South inequality) depend to a not inconsiderable extent on humankind's increased capability of intercultural and interlinguistic communication, a future goal towards which philosophy is to deliver models of thought. Once again I may remind the reader of the prophetic mission of intercultural philosophy.

Meanwhile it is good to realise that currently not only the anthropological, but also the philosophical practice is based on the tacit assumption of the possibility of adequate translation – despite the existence of philosophical theories, such as Quine's, claiming the indeterminacy of translation. Contemporary philosophers, including those in the most entrenched Western position, rely on a large number of predecessors, who wrote in the following languages among others: Greek, Latin, Italian, Arabic, Hebrew, French, English, German, Spanish, Russian, Polish, Danish, Dutch and Afrikaans. The great majority of philosophers only command one, two or three of these languages at the specialist level necessary for philosophical discourse and for independent research in the history of philosophy. Manifestly it is accepted practice that even professional philosophers consult the great majority of relevant philosophical texts in translation. Now in Western philosophy we are only dealing with two large linguistic families, Indo-European and Afro-Asiatic (the latter including the sub-family of Semitic, including Arabic and Hebrew); in intercultural philosophy the problem is substantially more complex, since this field in principle encompasses all³ current and extinct languages of the world.⁴ It is important to stress that philosophers in their everyday practice give every indication of a solid, self-evident trust in their own and other people's capability of interlinguality – *pace*

¹ Cf. Hookway 1993; Quine 1960, 1970, 1990b; Gadamer 1967b; Volosinov 1973; and the well-known polemics between Searle and Derrida: Searle 1977, 1983; Derrida 1988; cf. Hadreas n.d.

² Thus it is remarkable that in Genzler's (1993) thorough review of contemporary translation theories in five chapters, only one chapter was devoted to *philosophical* theories notably deconstructionism *à la* Derrida *c.s.*, while the great majority of reflection in this fundamental field of study came from cultural theorists, anthropologists and literary scholars.

³ Cf. Raju 1966.

⁴ In the face of such global diversity, one is amazed to see the term 'intercultural' frequently used to refer to exchanges between speakers of German, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, and Scandinavian languages within the European Union – as if these languages could still legitimately count as the boundary marker of just as many distinct 'cultures'. I prefer to see the European case as a plurality intimately related to closely related local linguistic forms within one comprehensive North Atlantic civilisation at the beginning of the third millennium of the Common Era.

Quine. This does not make them our best *prima facie* guides in the exploration of problems of interlinguality as an aspect of interculturality.

Modern philosophy's ethnocentrism is probably, more than anything else, and far from being the manifestation of a sinister anti-South complot, merely a pardonable simplification: within one language, one cultural orientation, most philosophical problems are already highly aporetic – without issue, without solution. Yet inter-meshing plurality, in combination with people's identitary retreat inside apparently unassailable boundaries, is the central experience of the contemporary world, and in this light Western philosophy's standard simplification of its problem field to just one language and one culture is increasingly unacceptable.

15.3.4. Culture and difference

Also, the second reason why philosophers have taken over the Tylorian concept of 'culture' is largely internal philosophical:¹ the convergence of the concept of culture with the creation, by post-structuralists such as Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, of a sophisticated conceptual apparatus for the thinking and handling of *difference*. Here the logocentric fascination with binary contradictions, which has captivated Western thought from the Presocratics right up to Hegel, Marx and the twentieth-century structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss, suddenly appeared in a different and critical light. Post-structuralism, which as a strategy of difference contained the possibility both of deconstructing and of affirming identity at the same time, came after two major intellectual movements (Marxism, structuralism) which relegated the diversity of 'cultures' to the status of an epiphenomenon; for both movements denied the specificity of distinct cultures in the light of some postulated more fundamental condition ('the historical inevitability of the struggle over material production and appropriation' in Marxism; or alternatively, 'the innate binary structure of the human mind' in structuralism) effectively reducing *emic* otherness to *etic* sameness. With the realisation that the binary opposition is a figure of thought whose two poles in fact may to some extent (like the *ourobouros* snake biting its tail in ancient Hermetic and alchemistic symbolism) contain each other and dissolve into each other, doubt was cast on two major strategies of thought, hitherto taken for granted:

- (a) the reduction of otherness to sameness (as in Marxism and structuralism), and
- (b) the entrenched conception of otherness as amounting to an absolute and irresolvable difference (as in Shen's dilemma).

Both strategies are of prime political importance in the contemporary globalising world: under the hegemonic onslaught of North Atlantic social, cultural, scientific and political forms, ultimately backed by the superior military power of the NATO,

¹ I am grateful to Heinz Kimmerle and Henk Oosterling for pointing out serious shortcomings in an earlier version of this paragraph.

and particularly the USA, there are strong pressures upon any person, community and polity outside the centre of power, either to submit to being co-opted into sameness (a), or to be subjected to exclusion as irretrievably different (b). For the post-structural 'philosophy of difference', difference becomes a basis for a recognition of the other as both equivalent and other – as a basis for respect instead of either appropriative imposition (a) or exclusion (b). At the same time, the philosopher is reminded of the possibility that whatever sameness to self he believed himself to recognise in the other, might well be vain self-projection, appropriation, and subjugation – and for this reason grand schemes as to some ultimate, underlying convergence of humankind, of all cultures and languages of the world, of all Old-World cultures, of all philosophical traditions worldwide, of all African cultures, etc., are treated with suspicion.¹ The difference-orientated intercultural philosopher wholeheartedly affirms what anthropologists had discovered decades earlier: culture is a machine for the production of difference, especially where initially there was undifferentiated and unarticulated sameness. For intercultural philosophy the anthropological concept of 'culture' turns out to be a tool for the articulation of collective positions of difference that may count as accepted points of departure for social and political action, in such a way that any attempt to merge these positions of difference into a higher unity will be dismissed as an assault (modernist or hegemonic) on their integrity.²

But while this is a laudable position that converges with the cultural relativism dominating anthropology from the mid-twentieth century onward, there is a price to be paid for the philosophical adoption of the anthropological concept of culture: Shen's dilemma then can no longer be solved. Cultural relativism, which was ushered into intercultural philosophy with the best of intentions, ultimately means an impediment towards the fulfilment of intercultural philosophy's most urgent social responsibility.

Philosophers have taken over the Tylorian concept of 'culture' as a strange body, a black box, without attempt to attune it systematically to other contemporary philosophical concepts such as category, subject, mind, the state, etc. In philosophy, the concept of 'culture' has an interesting history that however does not lead straight to Tylor. The origin of the concept lies in Roman antiquity: Cicero's *cultura animi* in the Stoic sense of spiritual exercise through reticence and respectful sociability. An absolute concept of 'culture' as referring to human action within a society was first used by the seventeenth-century theoretician of natural law Pufendorf. When one century later Herder added to this the notion of historicity, and began to speak of the 'culture' of specific peoples, the basis had been laid for a philosophy of culture. And such a philosophy of culture did materialise, with considerable delay, in the

¹ I am playing the devil's advocate here. Practically all my historical and philosophical research since 1990 has been devoted to establishing the theoretical, methodological and empirical conditions for the claims of an ultimate historical unity of mankind. We come back to this below.

² Cf. Kimmerle 1990.

beginning of the twentieth century, with philosophers like Dilthey, Rickert, Cassirer and Simmel; but it was to address almost exclusively European culture.¹ Even Spengler's worldwide perspective, which at first view would have little that is condescending vis-à-vis other civilisations,² had yet been inspired by the question as to the future of European civilisation.³ The German school of cultural philosophy around 1900 counted among its ranks, however, one writer who inexhaustibly and with visionary powers wrote about non-Western civilisations: Max Weber – but he can scarcely be considered a philosopher any more. The main achievement of this phase of the philosophy of culture was the development of a macro perspective on civilisations and cultures as totalities, occasionally (Rothacker, Gehlen)⁴ in confrontation with nature in the context of the historical genesis of man at the beginning of the Palaeolithic. Such philosophy of culture did have a profound effect on the social sciences in many respects (it stressed particularly the hermeneutic stance of *Verstehen*, that soon was to be popularised through Weber's writings),⁵ but its concept of 'culture' proved a dead end. If contemporary philosophers use the concept of 'culture' this is not in continuity with the philosophy of culture in Germany around the turn of the twentieth century, but in the sense of contemporary cultural anthropologists as heirs to Tylor. As the authoritative *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* states, almost with relief:

'Empirical cultural anthropology has nothing to do with the *Kulturanthropologie* of the German tradition in philosophy and the humanities.'⁶

Before 1960 (when Winch initiated the important debate on rationality and the analysis of exotic cultures)⁷ philosophy could scarcely offer an elaborate discourse on the encounter between 'cultures' at the micro level of individual participants and their concrete interaction situations, or on the production of knowledge at the

¹ Perpeet 1974, with exhaustive bibliographical references. The history of the concept of 'culture' between Roman antiquity and the eighteenth century is exhaustively treated in: Niedermann 1941.

² I define a civilisation as a socio-political system which – by virtue of such institutions as food production, state formation, writing and organised religion – displays a considerable degree of continuity over a vast geographical area and within which a plurality of cultural orientations are contained. The contradiction between 'culture' and civilisation, as posed by Kant and as elaborated by Spengler, is not fertile from a cultural anthropological perspective. Outside the German language area it has not been common to make such a distinction. Cf. Perpeet 1974, especially cols. 1318f.; Kant 1983a; Spengler 1993: 42f.

³ Spengler 1993.

⁴ Gehlen 1977; Rothacker 1920, 1926; Schoeps 1966: 216f; Achterhuis 1992.

⁵ Cf. Palmer 1969; Weber 1947; Gerth & Mills 1968.

⁶ Grawe 1974:

'Die empirische K[ulturanthropologie] hängt mit der Kulturanthropologie der deutschen philosophisch-geisteswissenschaftlichen Tradition nicht zusammen.'

⁷ Main events in this debate are, in alphabetic order: Appiah 1992; Duerr 1981; Gellner 1959; Gellner 1990; Hallen & Sodipo 1986; Hollis & Lukes 1982; Horton & Finnegan; Horton 1967; Kippenberg & Luchesi 1978; Sogolo 1993; Wilson 1970; Winch 1964, 1970. Winch's main inspiration was: Wittgenstein 1953.

boundary claimed to exist between 'cultures'. It is only for a slightly longer period that the sub-discipline of 'comparative philosophy' has existed; here the European, Chinese and Indian traditions – often characterised as 'cultures' in the sense critiqued above – are scrutinised for the extent to which they possess parallel themes. Islamic and African philosophy offer specific problems of classification for this sub-discipline. Islamic philosophy does so in that, in the few centuries that it can be said to have flourished (notably in the third to fifth centuries AH, i.e. in the eighth to eleventh centuries CE), it remained so close to classic Greek philosophy as to be virtually a branch of that tradition; African philosophy poses a classificatory problem because it is either very old but largely unrecorded (a point of view held by many passionate defenders of African philosophy), or (as Hountondji would have it) new and largely tributary to the North Atlantic academic philosophical tradition.

Understandably, contemporary philosophers have given in to the temptation of adopting the anthropological concept of 'culture', and to apply it within their own philosophical arguments without further revision. Thus, by the middle of the twentieth century philosophy ended up with a concept of 'culture' that displayed heavily holistic and essentialist traits just as in that concept's original cultural anthropological setting, and that was too naïve to problematise the performative aspects of cultural identity. However, in the last thirty years especially cultural anthropology, of all disciplines, has had no choice but to take a more relative and dynamic view of the concept of 'culture'. The two main related factors of this development have been the emerging theory of ethnicity (see below, section 15.7), and the need to account analytically for globalisation and the resulting multicultural society of the late twentieth century of the Common Era. This process in anthropology certainly has parallels¹ in philosophy (especially in the post-structuralist philosophy of difference) that have been a major inspiration in the development of intercultural philosophy,² despite the implicit Eurocentrism for which the most prominent post-structuralists have been chided.

15.4. From 'holistic culture' to partial 'cultural orientations'

Meanwhile the provocative title of this chapter, 'Cultures do not exist', must not be read as if I wish to banish forever the concept of 'culture' from intellectual discourse. Besides, such an attempt would be futile considering the way in which that concept has taken root in the non-specialist societal discourse of our time, globally and in all walks of life. I am *not* rejecting the idea of specific forms of programming of human representations and behaviour – a programming that is

¹ For the potential relevance of Guattari & Deleuze's work for contemporary cultural anthropology, cf. van Binsbergen 1999g. Meanwhile this does not take away the fact that – as I argue at length in the article cited – Guattari himself has only realised this potential in a very partial way, while relying on concepts and points of view which are unacceptable for professional anthropologists today.

² Mall 1995, which leans heavily on the post-structuralist philosophy of difference; Kimmerle 1990, 1994b; Kimmerle & Wimmer 1997; Kimmerle & Oosterling 2000; Oosterling 1989, 1996.

specific in space and time, that has an internal systematics, that is not idiosyncratic and limited to just one human being but on the contrary is shared, by virtue of learning processes, by a number of people, yet remains limited to a relatively small sub-set of humanity. This idea is based on undeniable empirical factors that every human being sees confirmed innumerable times in his pre-scientific everyday social experience. Such forms of programming I prefer to call, not ‘cultures’ but *cultural orientations*, in order to avoid the suggestion that, on the one hand, they order total human life on a grand scale and yet, on the other hand and at the same time, can be considered bounded, integrated and unique.

As long as we admit the situationality, multiplicity and performativity of ‘culture’ (a number of crucial insights of which a term like ‘cultural orientation’ reminds us), there is no longer a stringent reason to banish the words ‘culture’ and ‘cultural’ from our philosophical conceptual toolbox. The reader may rest assured: if the inaugural address on which this chapter is based, was to mark my accession to the Rotterdam chair of ‘intercultural philosophy’, it did not intend to do so by destroying the very notion of ‘culture’ on which ‘intercultural’ is inevitably based, nor by destroying the emerging branch of philosophy designated by that notion.

If the cultural is a form of programming, then it would be characterised by a systematic aspect rather than by the absence of systematics. The contradiction between structuralists and post-structuralist resides, among other points, in the post-structuralists casting doubt on the systemic nature of the cultural experience. This contradiction arises, in part, from the erroneous choice of too high a level of abstraction. If one conceives of ‘cultures’ as bounded, integrated totalities that may be adequately designated by means of an ethnonym,¹ and within which a human being can lead a complete life from morning to evening and from birth to death, without necessarily crossing into other ‘cultures’, then it would inevitably come to light that the claim of a cultural systematics is an illusion, behind which lies, in reality, the kaleidoscopic effects of multiple cultural orientations that criss-cross each other simultaneously, and each of which is built on systemic principles that are not informing the others.

In earlier centuries the state and a world religion such as Christianity and Islam were often capable of imposing upon this multiplicity of cultural orientations their own hierarchical ordering, resulting in a constellation that might loosely be described as ‘Islamic culture’ or ‘Christian culture’; but today in the North Atlantic region the state and world religions are no longer capable of doing so. In the first place, there is the specificity of cultural orientations associated with distinct classes, professional groups, levels of education, linguistic communities, religious communities. Even when we limit ourselves to a consideration of those roles that

¹ Considering the abundance of ethnonymic reference in his work, this is implicitly the – obsolescent – position taken by Lévi-Strauss and by most anthropologists of his generation. The post-structuralist philosophers have only a limited discourse on other cultural orientations than those which have been bundled in contemporary North Atlantic society.

have been acquired by a learning process and that are being played in the public space, we have to admit that practically every human being finds himself at the intersection of *a number* of different cultural orientations, between which there is often no systematic connection.

Take notions of purity. The androgynous tenderness and the psychological immunity to polluting dirt informing my role as a father changing my young children's diapers has nothing to do with the very different stress on very different conceptions of purity which I invoke in totally different social settings activating totally different social roles and identities on my part: for example the histrionic display of anger that I summon when finding a hair in the soup served in an expensive restaurant when I am entertaining a visiting professor from Africa; or the undodging sense of impeccable formal purity with which I yield to the tyrannical syntactic requirements of a computer language when writing computer programs; or the relish with which I use my fingers as ready-made brushes in my amateur painting; or the stoic resignation with which I have daily braved cockroaches, rotten meat, and mouldy staple food in certain parts of Africa under famine conditions.

Cultural systematics do exist within each distinct cultural orientation, but not necessarily between various cultural orientations. Moreover, in the context of the contemporary, globalising world there is, in the sphere of private life, nutrition and other forms of consumption, recreation, gender and sexuality, a constantly increasing plurality of lifestyles at various stages of articulate definition, and all these lifestyles (each with greater or lesser degrees of distinctness, boundedness, and conspicuousness through a specific name and other boundary markers) yield their own microscopic cultural orientation. The subject who finds himself at the intersection of all these orientations is a fragmented, kaleidoscopic subject to which we would be wrong to attribute a high degree of integration – perhaps it has even disappeared as a subject.¹ It is as if today's secularised, globalising society has, more than any other historical societies, furthered the fragmentation of the subject. But in a formal sense the situation in other societies is not fundamentally different in that these societies too consist of the bundling (that is only effected at the level of the complex role behaviour and ego consciousness of individual participants) of a plurality of cultural orientations between which there is no systemic internal correspondence or coherence.

For instance, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the socio-cultural life of the Nkoya people of western Zambia was built up out of the contradiction between two enmeshing cultural orientations: village life, based on autarkic agricultural production and hunting, kinship, and non-violence as the principle governing interpersonal relations; and court life, based on the parasitic, non-productive exploitation of village communities for food, other produce, and human personnel, and governed by the denial of principles of kinship and non-violence.²

¹ Van Binsbergen 1999d.

² Van Binsbergen 1992b, 1993d = 1996f, 2003b.

The anthropological approach in terms of the articulation of modes of production¹ could have such a great success in the 1970s–1980s precisely because it was the theoretical expression of the empirical fact that also archaic, non-Western societies display not a totally integrated structure but instead a diversity of orderings, each of which has its own systematics, its own distinct internal logic, such as that theoretical approach analysed – no doubt one-sidedly – from the perspective of production.

If we could at all speak of a system at the level of society as a whole, then it would certainly not be an all-embracing, holistic *cultural* system, but a system of economic and political control – and the economic and the political constitute dimensions of social life that scarcely enter the discourse of structuralists, who otherwise have been the prime champions of the systemic nature of culture.

The most obvious way of identifying the various cultural orientations that may be discerned within one society is by searching, within the cultural practices of that society, for consistent (in other words systematic) semantic fields that have a *limited* extension and whose limitation consists in their being denied, challenged, combated or destroyed by other, adjacent, differently structured semantic fields. It is in this way – by assessing the range of application of specific semantic fields in empirically documented mythical and ritual contexts, and ascertaining where this application became excessively contradictory or came into open conflict with other, differently constructed semantic fields – that I was capable of identifying various religious complexes in the society of western central Zambia, each religious complex as the ideological component of a specific mode of production: ancestor veneration, the veneration of royal ancestors, of the High God, of spirits that are not supposed to be bound to specific localised communities, etc.²

In this sense, at a much lower level of aggregation than the society as a whole, the distinct cultural orientations do have a systemic character, by definition. Acquiring a cultural orientation through a learning process amounts to programming that systematics onto the behaviour of the individual participants. Of the many cultural orientations that are present in a society, everyone learns a few score in the course of his life, and the ethnographer (as well as the trader, the sailor, the diplomat, the itinerant traditional healer, etc.) learns a few additional ones that belong to a different society and that are not or hardly present in his own society of origin.

‘Cultures’ in the holist sense do not exist except as the illusions of the participants. However, social actors in the world today explicitly utilise the concept of ‘culture’, and they do so in the same polysemic and contradictory way in which most indigenous concepts are used by social actors. This is a major reason why the concept of ‘culture’ is hardly useful any more as a technical term for philosophy or

¹ Godelier 1975; Hindess & Hirst 1975; Jewsiewicki *c.s.* 1985; Kahn & Llobera 1981; Meillassoux 1975; Rey 1971; Suret-Canale 1974; Terray 1969; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a, 1985b.

² Cf. van Binsbergen 1981a.

empirical social science. Meanwhile, in the hands of social actors, the very concept of 'culture' may bring about effects that are horrifyingly real:

- the Nazist Holocaust;
- ethnic cleansing in late-twentieth century Europe and Africa;
- ethnic politics that have led to the absolute erosion of the constitutional structures of many African states today, in a dual process encompassing first their experiences after territorial decolonisation, then their experiences after the democratisation movement of around 1990;
- multicultural, migrancy and refugee policies in West European states today that rely on the reference to 'cultures', in the plural, to stress the differences between social actors, but that are incapable of curbing the rising feelings of frustration, insecurity, hatred and alienation in those countries;
- the rise of a mutual enemy image composed of stereotypical cultural traits separating Middle Eastern Muslim Arabs and North Atlantic Americans.

'Unreal in existence, real in effect', is one of the current definitions of the concept of *virtuality*. The contemporary social experience is full of such virtuality. For instance, the concept of 'culture' emerged from the world of science (as an *etic* term), but via the media and the educational institutions it has transformed itself and begins to reverberate in widespread feedback like an ill-adjusted public address system. Members of contemporary, globalising society have appropriated the concept of culture as an empowering *emic* term, no longer controllable from its original base in science. This is only one example, among very many processes of dislocation, where cultural products from a specific localisable provenience are appropriated into subsequent contexts that are rather alien to the original one and largely independent from it; in the process, the original product is transformed, whereas the appropriating contexts can be said to constitute themselves through the very process of virtualising appropriation.¹ As an *emic* term 'cultures' (plural) is a virtual concept that is no longer at home in philosophy or in empirical social science except in order to be deconstructed in a bid to lay bare its underlying semantic structure and political implications – always in the hope that such critical deconstruction (as in the present argument) will also find its way to the wider society.

15.5. The relativity of an empirical perspective

For the philosopher the statement 'cultures do not exist' is problematic, not in the first instance because of the concept of 'culture', but because of the word 'exist'.

The question concerning existence, and the question concerning the possibilities and conditions of knowledge (knowledge about that which exists) are among the

¹ Van Binsbergen 1997f, 1998a.

most important ones in philosophy. Empirical science is in no position whatsoever to answer these questions for us, for it thrives, itself, on the basis of specific – albeit usually implicit – choices from among the many possible answers to the questions concerning being and concerning knowledge. If, for instance, one adopts, as in Buddhist philosophy, the position that the reality to which the senses appear to testify is merely an illusion, whereas the true Being only becomes knowable after many phases (for most people very difficult, or impossible, to traverse) of meditative distancing from the apparently concrete world of the senses, then from such a perspective the idea of empirical science is absolutely absurd; but whereas the Buddhist school of thought dominated China, among other parts of Asia, for centuries (after which it lost its grip on China), in that same country Taoism, as the older and more persistent school, displayed an orientation towards sensory reality characterised by far greater kinship with Western science.¹

Empirical science presupposes a kind of realism: the assumption that there is a reality out there that is not limited to consciousness (although it may be in consciousness that the categories are given with which to gather knowledge of that reality), but that also has concrete, factual manifestation in a manner which is in principle independent from consciousness. The dynamics of empirical science take place between consciousness and sensory perception, between concrete fact and category of thought, and between the individual researcher and the collectivity of researchers. On the one hand, there is the collectivity of scientists that only under far-reaching conditions of method, consistency and conformity admits modes of individual knowledge to the realm of intersubjectivity and thus declares these individual modes to amount to science; on the other hand, there is the social collectivity: the latter's reception of scientific production is the end goal of such production. As I have stressed in the Introduction to this book, that reception is problematic: scientific insights may be built into a society's collective representations, but then they cease by definition to be scientific, and many collective representations reflect the science, not of today, but of yesterday. On the other hand, collective representations constitute a major distortive influence on individual and collective processes of scientific observation and conceptualisation in the first place.

Empirical scientists are seldom conscious of the fact that their professionalised form of knowledge production implies a number of essentially arbitrary choices in the fields of epistemology and ontology. They can afford this naïveté since, in the course of the last few centuries in the North Atlantic region, empirical sciences have developed into a self-evident, taken-for-granted institution; this institution reflects, underpins, and increasingly legitimates, power relations – in ways Foucault more than any other modern thinker has helped us to recognise. And here I do not refer in the first place to such power relations as exist within the world of science itself and are responsible for the fact that the scientific 'state of the art' as accepted by the

¹ Needham *c.s.* 1961, 1956; Beckh 1961.

community of scientists is always a shifting compromise of intra-disciplinary power relations; that is understood. But the power aspect of modern empirical science reaches much further. Such science is a nursery for universality claims concerning the reality of the senses – claims such as

- ‘ $V = i * R$ ’ (Ohm’s law)
- ‘photosynthesis is the source of all energy for life forms on earth’
- ‘all human societies possess “cat’s cradles” (rope figures) as well as some kind of incest prohibition’.

But the impact of such scientific universality is not limited to the domain of science alone. In the contemporary North Atlantic region, empirical science sets the example of truths that are surrounded with great authority and connotations of universality. It has become a major legitimating force, its example breeds in the minds of contemporary citizens the preparedness to accept other universalist claims, those of a socio-political nature, that are determining the contemporary world to a high degree but that, because of their normative or performative nature, cannot possibly be based on empirical science. I mean such ideas as

- the self-evident authority of the modern state and of her principal instrument, the formal organisation
- the self-evidently universal nature (if not in application then at least in allegedly universal applicability) of human rights and of the democratic constitutional form of the state
- the self-evidence and inviolability of the subject, of identity, and of ‘culture’
- the self-evident claim that universalism has primarily sought North Atlantic social, cultural, political and scientific forms to express itself (as in Hegel’s Eurocentrism), which accords to these forms of self-evident superiority as underpinning the globally hegemonic project that has characterised the North Atlantic region ever since the sixteenth century CE.

Such self-evidences, far from being scientific, belong to the collective representations which form the preconditions of the North Atlantic social order.

Manifestly, empirical science is just another cultural orientation among the many other such orientations of North Atlantic society; and it is one of extraordinary importance for the production of the self-evidences that not only determines the structure of our own lives but in which also superiority claims reverberate vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Empirical science posits a form of life that in the last analysis may turn out to be Eurocentric and hegemonic. But at the same time it tries to wrench itself free from this particularistic and regional societal grip by making its methods and techniques highly explicit, refined and intersubjective. This is why radical anti-hegemonic discourses make such a point of advocating epistemological alternatives to current empirical science – for instance, in the form of a specifically African epistemology, or by asking – as in Harding’s approach – if current empirical

sciences can be reduced to the status of merely one specific, culturally determined, local form of knowledge (an 'ethnoscience'), in the midst of the infinite number of conceivable ethnosciences from all over the globe.¹

With regard to the type of phenomena that is usually studied by the natural sciences, Harding's suggestion that modern science is maybe merely an ethnoscience of the North Atlantic region would at first sight appear to be little convincing. However, if we read Harding carefully we will find that her feminist and Third World perspective on modern science yet leaves largely intact modern science's claims to universality, objectivity and rationality – in other words, its claims to an universalisable *epistemological* underpinning of its truth, and not just a *political* underpinning which only holds for the here and the now of current geopolitical power relations. This notwithstanding the fact that other forms of knowledge based elsewhere in the world may lay similar claims. Despite its considerable epistemological underpinning, North Atlantic science should try to learn from these other forms of knowledge if it ever wants to shed the one-sidedness springing from its historical association and European/North Atlantic hegemony.²

No matter how much we may claim that natural scientific knowledge is arbitrary, local, and potentially subservient to Eurocentrism, yet planes based on that knowledge do not spontaneously crash into the ground as soon as they venture outside the North Atlantic region, watches keep on ticking, the electromagnetic waves generated under this scientific regime turn out to have an apparently unlimited action radius so that they may be transmitted back to earth via man-made spacecraft travelling to the Moon, or even beyond Saturn, and biochemical medicine enjoys its considerable (though by no means unlimited) successes all over the world regardless of the cultural and somatic specificity of its practitioners and its patients.³ Third World revolutionary movements that radically steer away from North Atlantic cultural orientations, acquire and utilise for the furthering of their cause manufactured products (weaponry, aeroplanes, Information and Communication Technology) whose successful use in their hands is manifestly not impeded by these movements being alien to, or even deliberately opposed to, North Atlantic cultural orientations. World view is simply not the decisive factor for science and technology to work: these weapons work just the same in the hands of bandits who operate without explicit ideological positioning and who, thriving in the many pockets of ineffective state control throughout the Third, Second and increasingly even First World today, are responsible for the escalating privatisation of violence.

¹ Cf. Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998; MacGaffey 1986 (for African or Africanist epistemologies); Harding 1997, cf. 1994. A rather less extreme form of Harding's approach underlies: Hountondji 1994.

² Cf. van Binsbergen 2001c and 2002c.

³ Contemporary epistemological insights begin to take a distance from the distinction between natural sciences and humanities ('Geisteswissenschaften' that only one or two generations ago was taken for granted (cf. d'Agostino 1993, who bases himself specifically on: Bernstein 1983; Rorty 1979; Putnam 1978, 1981). I myself also make only a gradual distinction between natural and social sciences when it comes to the possibility and desirability of alternative epistemologies.

The unmistakable success of North Atlantic natural, medical and technical science, although based on the dominant epistemologies informing mainstream North Atlantic academic research and academic practice, does not *ipso facto* exclude other epistemologies, from other cultural backgrounds, for the description and explanation of natural phenomena – and many such epistemologies have managed to persist for centuries in their concrete practical niches of agriculture, hunting, metallurgy, house construction, magic and therapy. There they apparently offered an attractive mode of explanation that adequately took care of the necessity of survival precisely within the local natural environment which these alternative epistemologies sought to describe and master. Thinking through the plurality of possible epistemologies for the approach to sensory reality is one of the tasks confronting intercultural philosophy, as we have seen in chapter 7 of this book. Natural science today finds itself in a field of tension. To a certain extent it is entitled to the claim of being cosmopolitan, universalist, part of the common heritage of humankind. On the other hand, it is to a great extent the specific and recent creation of North Atlantic modernity, charged with a heavy hegemonic burden.¹ This applies a fortiori to the social sciences. The phenomena that the latter study are largely the product of human intentionality and signification. And by virtue of this fact any social scientific epistemology will, to a large extent, have an ethnocentric bias derived from the society (still principally the North Atlantic one) from whose midst social science research is being conceived and executed even if the object of research is to be found outside the North Atlantic region (as is often the case for anthropology). The specific social-science epistemology employed constitutes simply one specific choice for the construction of self-evidences, which in the society under study would be constructed differently. Whatever poses as an impartial, objective scientific perspective is therefore in the best case the confrontation between two sets of self-evidences of matching strength but different contents; and in the worst case the denial of the value and the rights of the other society.

In this context it is unusual, and risky, to appeal to empirical social sciences in order to correct current philosophical approaches of interculturality. Yet this is what I am about to do. Worse still, I will go even further and claim that philosophy itself is much more of an empirical science than philosophers are prepared to admit.

15.6. Philosophy as empirical science?

It is quite usual that philosophy appropriates elements from the empirical sciences, and even though this kind of interdisciplinary borrowings tends to lag a few decades behind the state-of-the-art in the discipline from which it is being borrowed, yet

¹ This contradiction is at the heart of my philosophical treatment of Information and Communication Technology in chapter 13.

without such appropriation philosophy could not pursue fundamental research into the foundations of the empirical sciences.

Some philosophers take the position that the upward flight of philosophy should not be thwarted by empirical 'so-called facts'. Philosophy may then be conceived as the investigation of concepts, methods of argument, and meanings, and hence as the development (with a precarious balance between innovative originality and intra-disciplinary intersubjectivity¹), the testing out and the administration, of language forms capable of articulating the aporias of the contemporary existence, notably in a way that is not yet furnished by other human practices (empirical sciences, belles lettres, other forms of art, politics and religious discourse). In this conception philosophy is a specific practice whose ontological referent, in the last analysis, is the contemporary social experience (in which, however, the experience of other points in space and time may reverberate so that these past and exotic human experiences should also be incorporated in the philosophical exercise). From this point of view it would be hard to defend a totally non-empirical conception of philosophy – even though we had to admit the need for a non-empirical component: for technical research leading to ever better tools in the domain of conceptualisation and logic which do not strikingly reflect an experience that is specific in space and time.

Philosophy thus shares with belles lettres the development of language forms that promise a superior insight. However, contrary to the literary writer, the philosopher seldom works entirely for his own account: most philosophical writings thrive on the rendering and interpretation of the thought systems of other explicitly mentioned philosophers and philosophical movements. The sources for the latter constitute an empirical referent that, ontologically, has almost the same status as the data on which literature scholars, historians and cultural anthropologists base themselves. This raises the same questions as to method, disciplinary intersubjectivity, societal appropriation, cultural bias and the resonance of general societal power relations in the production of knowledge. It would be to philosophy's advantage if, for this life-size empirical dimension of its practice, it put a greater premium on method, and a lesser premium on originality. Nearly every decade invents its own reading of Nietzsche, Hegel, Plato, or the Presocratics; if the reference to an existing philosophical oeuvre or corpus is to be more than a polite pretext for speaking about our own concerns today in terms of, largely, our own discourse, such a re-reading should simply follow the critical canons established in literary and historiographic empirical research.

Coming from an empirical scientist who insists on the methods and results of contemporary empirical science as an example for philosophy, my argument here may remind one of that of the physicists Sokal and Bricmont a few years ago. In the most Droogstoppel-like fashion they demonstrate how the appropriation of a contemporary physics idiom has yielded some of the most obscure pages of the most

¹ On philosophy as an intersubjective activity, cf. e.g. Luijpen 1980, chapter 1.

prominent French philosophers.¹ They derive their sense of being right from an experiment that Sokal conducted within the pages of the cultural studies journal *Social Text*. There he treated, tongue in cheek, current quantum physics as an esoteric text requiring a postmodern hermeneutics. He reproduced in what he himself considered a nonsensical article the post-structuralist idiom so faithfully that the article was accepted for publication as a serious contribution.² Sokal and Bricmont can think of nothing better but to assess the philosophical use of idiom in the light of the conventional meaning of the terms in question in their original physics and mathematics context. This approach smacks of parochialism and essentialism, and is out of touch with the contemporary world at large, where borrowing across boundaries (including disciplinary boundaries), followed by far-reaching transformative localisation of the borrowed goods at their new destination, is the order of the day. My point of view is fundamentally different from theirs: they do not make the slightest attempt to understand and apply the philosophical use of language in its own intentionality, and they persist in a naïvely uncritical view of their own empirical science, which they simply take for granted as God's truth, without acknowledging its ephemeral and provisional nature.³ Sokal's post-structuralist reading of modern quantum physics, even if intended as a pedantic hoax, may yet turn out to contain more wisdom than its author credits himself with, and certainly more wisdom than Sokal and Bricmont's debunking of French post-structuralist technical philosophical language. That quantum mechanics – even if philosophically appropriated beyond the physicists' original intentions – does contain a great promise towards the elucidation of topical philosophical problems concerning boundaries and their transgression, the maintenance and fusion of identity, unity versus plurality, the mind, spirituality, corporeality etc., will be clear from my own brief exploration in chapter 7, which no doubt is also to be faulted in Sokal and Bricmont's eyes. It is precisely the post-structuralist deconstruction of the autonomous subject, of all theoretical positions, which makes it thinkable that an idea, while being in the air and reflecting the contradictions of the age, may inadvertently flow out of the pen of a cynical author who is consciously rejecting that idea.⁴

These reflections on the empirical constraints on philosophy have a direct bearing on intercultural philosophy. For intercultural philosophy it is of the greatest

¹ Sokal & Bricmont 1997. In Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* (Multatuli 2001), the masterpiece of this leading nineteenth-century Dutch novelist, Droogstoppel is an extremely prosaic character, a merchant devoid of all feeling for poetry and for the imaginary in general.

² Sokal 1996a. The result was a minor affair in the pages of *Le Monde* and the *New York Review of Books*: Boghossian 1996; Bricmont 1997; Duclos 1997; Levisalles 1996; Rio 1997; Salomon 1997; Sokal 1996b, 1996c, 1997a; Weill 1996; Weinberg 1996a, 1996b.

³ Cf. van Binsbergen 1999g.

⁴ This is incidentally how I came to appreciate the Egyptocentric variety of academic Afrocentrism: I cynically started to write a book-length attack of it (van Binsbergen, forthcoming (a)). Cf. below, section 15.11.

importance to realise that rendering the thought of another thinker or of a tradition of thought is an empirical activity with all attending demands of method. In connection with the literate philosophical traditions of the Ancient Near East, Islam, South Asia and East Asia, the dangers of blundering are limited, for here there exist rich local forms of philological-critical scholarship of great antiquity, and intersubjectivity between local and North Atlantic specialists can only be achieved at the price of the North Atlantic scholars living up to the high, local standards of technical competence and language mastery. This tradition of non-North Atlantic scholarship also makes it possible to expose and overcome such Eurocentric flaws as the empirical perspective directed to those parts of the world may yet contain – as is clearly manifested by the Orientalism discussion as initiated by Said.¹ However, when we are dealing with illiterate traditions of thought, then their recording and interpretation is nothing but a specific form of ethnography. It will have to be situated against the background of the accumulated experience, comparative research and technical criticism – as well as the critique of epistemological naïveté and North Atlantic hegemony – of many thousands of ethnographers who in the course of a hundred years have occupied themselves with the empirical handiwork of ethnography. *In the first instance, ethnography was nothing other than covering with text those parts of the world that had not yet produced their own text.* By a process of initial avoidance of adjacent disciplines, which is characteristic of the professionalisation of a new discipline (below we shall point out the same pattern for early anthropology), the emergent fields of intercultural philosophy and African philosophy have tended to ignore this methodological heritage (i.e. *their closeness to ethnography*), and have even dissimulated the empirical status of their activities – perhaps not in principle, but certainly to the extent that they do not live up to the methodological responsibilities which empirical research imposes. If, nonetheless, they rush to the description of African philosophies the way these are manifest in myths, proverbs, and in the oral pronouncements of contemporary thinkers – then these intercultural and African philosophers are no more entitled to the benefit of doubt than those ethnographers who persist in their naïve empiricism.

Experienced and well-trained anthropologists, some of the calibre of Marcel Griaule and Victor Turner, made it their life's work to record – by an analysis of myths, rituals, conflicts, depth interviews, and the practice of everyday life – African patterns of thought and their actual contents, either by an external, *etic* process of rendering explicit the systematics that is implicit in their hosts' patterns of thought, or by a more *emic* method of faithfully recording the pronouncements of local thinkers such as Ogotomêlli (studied by Griaule) or Muchona (studied by Turner). Naturally the ethnographic methods of Griaule or Turner are not all above criticism.²

¹ Ahmad 1992; Breckenridge & van der Veer 1993; Clifford 1988a; Lewis 1993; Mani & Frankenberg 1985; Said 1978; Turner 1994; van der Veer 1995.

² Cf. on Muchona and Turner: Turner 1967b; de Boeck & Devisch 1994; Shorter 1972; Papstein 1978. On Ogotomêlli and Griaule: Griaule 1966; Clifford 1988b; Copans 1973; Goody 1967; Lettens 1971; Ogonu

The point is, however that intercultural philosophers, even without engaging in a methodological discussion with the work of Griaule or Turner, think they know better: Ogotomelli and Muchona would then be denied the status of 'real' 'sages', while the institution of 'the sage' would yet be claimed to occur throughout Africa, but unfortunately unnoticed by all those anthropologists, who inevitably are to be declared to lack all access to authentic African thought¹

In such a denial of the potential of cultural anthropology for intercultural philosophy I see an expression – probably unintended – of essentialism and anti-empiricism, namely:

- the claim that there are specifically African essential traits
- which are inaccessible to the empirical methods of North Atlantic social sciences
- which only Africans are capable of understanding and articulating
- whose only trustworthy guardians are the exponents of African and intercultural philosophy,
- precisely because the latter take a distance from the canons of empirical (social) science.

I do not think that, in the long run, such an attitude renders a service to Africans. Africa, which has produced humankind and which via Ancient Egypt has made a very great contribution to North Atlantic civilisation, will easily survive the encounter with empirical science – with this proviso that this should not remain a form of science imported straight from the North with all its naïveté and Euro-centrism, but that Africans will have to continue to explore their own specific variants of empirical research and its methodological canons.

Instead of a rejection of empirical methods in their own practice, and in that of other sciences, the anti-empiricist rhetoric among philosophers often takes a different form: that of the careless or ignorant dissimulation of the formidable methodological requirements of valid empirical knowledge production. Thus the appeal to empirical knowledge in philosophical discourse often amounts to statements that are passable at the level of collective representations, but that are insufficiently precise and comprehensive to pass as scientifically grounded renditions of the empirical reality to which the appeal is being made. In regard to such self-evidences as philosophers may claim, essential elements remain out of sight or are swept under the carpet: method, intersubjectivity, the cultural and political over-determination of such self-evidences; thus the value of their arguments is greatly reduced. It characterises intercultural philosophy as a young branch of science that such self-evidences abound there; the habitual approach, in those circles, in terms of a plurality of holistically conceived 'cultures' is a case in point.

d'Arou 1956; Sarevskaja 1963; the most dismissive reinterpretation of Griaule in the 1990s has been Wouter van Beek's in *Current Anthropology* (van Beek 1991).

¹ Kimmerle 1997; Odera Oruka 1990b.

Even more of a short-cut available to philosophers in their avoidance of an explicitly empirical methodology, is what I might call *canonical botanising*. Here the argument proceeds, from the enunciation of a certain phenomenon, not to the painstaking exploration of that phenomenon with the aid of such empirical research as is usually abundantly available, but to the classification of the phenomenon in question in terms of a certain passage in the work of a canonised Great Philosopher – after which the discussion is dominated by the interpretation of that one passage, as if that would sufficiently underpin such self-evidences as have been claimed in the first place. *Autos efá*, ‘He [Pythagoras] said so himself’, was the stopgap by which the Pythagoreans lent unassailable authority to their own pronouncements; but in the process they reduced their richly inspiring philosophy to a mystery cult.

An example is Derrida’s claim¹ to the effect that writing precedes the oral expression, since anything which may be conducive to inscription, from the earliest prehistory of humankind, is already to be defined as writing: a deliberately snapped twig on a branch, a line drawn with the finger in the sand. The deceptive nature of such an argument, if taken literally, does not *per se* lie in the use of the term ‘writing’ – for one might put oneself on a nominalistic standpoint and accordingly choose one’s definition freely. However, by adopting the contrast between writing and orality, unmistakably conceptual continuity is suggested with the usual definition of writing in the empirical sciences. And from that perspective Derrida’s position is absurd. The origin and the oldest forms of writing are well documented; they have been the subject of hundreds of highly scholarly empirical publications.² In this literature we have seen the growth of a consensus as to what constitutes writing, on the basis of a careful weighing of the empirical evidence against the background of progressive theoretical sophistication. This consensus defines a full script as a system consisting of a finite number of arbitrary, fixed, mutually distinctive and for that very reason mutually related visual elements, which are being used productively (i.e. that an infinite number of combinations may be generated on the basis of a finite number of systematic rules and elements), in such a way that all speech sounds of the specific languages for whose rendering the script is being used may be represented (more or less adequately) in that script. Such a script represents neither objects, nor ideas, but simply spoken words. In the history of humankind, full writing in this sense has been attested only from the late fourth millennium before the common era, notably from Sumer, Elam and Egypt. Far more limited precursors of full writing, in the form of pictograms and ideograms, are up to ten thousand years older and go back to the Upper Palaeolithic. Against the background of this empirical tradition, it is ridiculously anachronistic to speak of script and writing for

¹ Derrida 1967a. My administration for other aspects of Derrida’s thought will be clear throughout this book.

² Albright 1966; Bernal 1990; Best & Woudhuizen 1988; Bottéro 1992; de Mecquenem 1949; Diringier 1996; Evans 1909; Gelb 1963; Gimbutas 1991, ch. 8: ‘The sacred script’; Gordon 1982; Hassan 1983; Karlgren 1940; Labat 1988; Marshack 1972; Naveh 1982; Parpola 1994; Ray 1986; Schmandt-Besserat 1992; Thompson 1960; Coe 1992; and extensive references contained in these publications. For the anthropological approach to writing, cf. Goody 1968, 1986; Lemaire 1984.

the preceding three million years of human history. If we throw overboard the specific characteristics of full writing we can no longer explain the enormous influence that full writing has had on religion, philosophy, science, literature, state formation, law. It is typical of the procedure of canonical botanising that – in favour of one passage from a Great Philosopher – it feels it can ignore the entire, empirically grounded, literature on writing and on the distinctions between types of writing and their implications.¹ Are we not being condescending towards Africans when we pretend that, according to some twisted and indefensible definition, they yet turn out to have writing after all, as if *not* having writing is the greatest, most dehumanising disaster that could possibly happen to a person or to a people? Is such an attitude not somewhat ethnocentric? Strangely, the more usual definitions of writing allow the African continent (and not just Ancient Egypt) a much more prominent place in the history and distribution of writing than is generally acknowledged.² My worry here is not, of course, that apparently undeservingly global recognition would be given to unwritten African traditions of thought. For it has been my life's work as a literary writer, anthropologist, Southern African diviner-priest-therapist (*sangoma*), and intercultural philosopher, to further precisely such recognition. No, my worry is that intercultural philosophers (without explicit adequate empirical methods, and insufficiently aware of their own personal problematic of transference, nostalgia and vicarious projection even though these makes them distort the African material) would claim to mediate African traditions whereas in fact all they are representing is figments of these philosophers' imagination, fed by the North Atlantic philosophical tradition and not by an intimate knowledge of varieties of illiterate and orality-based African life.

If intercultural philosophers entrench themselves in a concept of 'culture' that stipulates a countable plurality of holistic 'cultures', and if they approach the empirical dimension of the rendering of other traditions of thought as if no sound methods have been worked out for such a task, then we have no choice but to remind them of contemporary empirical insights in 'culture' and identity, even despite all reservations we have vis-à-vis the empirical sciences for their implicitly naïve and hegemonic nature.

15.7. Globalisation and ethnicity

15.7.1. Nkoya ethnic identity

For myself, the awareness that 'cultures do not exist' emerged during fieldwork in the Zambian capital of Lusaka in the early 1970s. Here the Nkoya ethnic group constituted a small minority of at most a thousand people, who by means of

¹ I am not speaking as an outsider to this field of study; cf. van Binsbergen 1997c, 1997g; and forthcoming (b).

² Cf. van Binsbergen 1997c.

collective rituals (girls' puberty ceremonies, possession cults, and funerary ceremonies) managed to maintain a considerable amount of mutual contact and continuity with the cultural practices of their distant home in the Zambian countryside. One night I visited a puberty ceremony, as I did so often in those days. While I danced around with the crowd and joined in the singing, I was addressed by a Black middle-aged man, meticulously dressed in a smart chalk-stripe three-piece suit, who despite his corpulence and his game leg made fierce attempts to keep up with the dancing rhythm. He said, in inimitable Zambian English:

'Yesseh Bwana, diss iss áowaa twadísyonaa káwatyaa' – 'You see now, Boss, this is our traditional culture'.

Taken-for granted cultural identity but also alienation, performativity (consciously playing a role with deliberately sought-after effect), and commodification of 'culture' – all united in one person.

In the next quarter of a century I became more and more familiar with the religion and the kingship of the Nkoya, and I ended up as the adopted son of Mwene Kahare Kabambi, one of the kings of this people. This was the context in which, from 1988, I applied myself to the study of cultural globalisation among the Nkoya in the rural areas, especially the way in which a formal organisation (the *Kazanga Cultural Association*, an ethnic association articulating Nkoya ethnic identity, and largely administered by successful urban migrants) managed to select and transform the local music and dance into an annual ethnic festival, a programmed and carefully orchestrated *performance* named Kazanga. Since 1988, time-honoured genres of local music¹ and dance have been emphatically *performed* in a format adopted from North Atlantic examples, and before an audience of national-level politicians and other outsiders. The performative nature of this new form of cultural production in the context of the *Kazanga* festival turned out to be closely related to commodification: in former times this symbolic production had, for the participants, always derived its self-evident value from the cosmology and the temporal rhythm (in annual seasonal cycles, personal life cycles, and the rise and decline of communities, headmanship and kingships) of the local rural community, but now this value has been dissociated from the local and has become a commodity, part of the strategies by which means regional elites seek to acquire power and wealth.

Ethnic articulation with performative and commodified methods, such as in *Kazanga*, situates itself in an increasingly politicised space, in which the local cultural orientations have lost their self-evidence by the confrontation with local and global alternative forms of expression, organisation and identity. We would remain absolutely incapable of understanding these processes if we continue to insist on a model of the plurality of distinct, complete 'cultures' existing side by side. Instead,

¹ Brown 1984.

the contemporary social science of Africa presents the following discourse on ethnicity.

15.7.2. The discourse on ethnicity in African studies today

One of the most inveterate popular misconceptions concerning Africa today is the idea that the population of that continent would, in the first place, have to be classified into a large number of 'tribes'; each tribe would be characterised by its own 'culture', art, language, somatic features, political organisation, including 'tribal chief', and its own 'tribal homeland' or 'tribal territory'; the latter would cause the African continent to be a large patchwork quilt of adjacent, non-overlapping, fixed 'tribal areas', between which 'tribal wars' are postulated to go back to remote antiquity.

The tribal model for Africa has sprung from a number of sources, most of which have to be situated not in Africa itself but in the North Atlantic region:

- the preference of colonial governments for clear-cut administrative divisions each coinciding with mutually exclusive territories in the landscape;
- the preference of colonial governments for a model of inexpensive indirect administration, that assumed the existence, in the landscape, of local, indigenous administrative territories coinciding with colonial territorial divisions;
- European views concerning the coincidence of 'culture', language, territory and the state – the early modern, particularly Romantic origin of nation formation in Europe;
- the rationalising need, not only among colonial governments but also among industrial enterprises, among the Christian missions, and gradually also among Africans, to label unequivocally the multitude of cultural and linguistic identities at the local, regional and national level;
- while the above factors led to the crystallisation of clear-cut classifications of the African population – mainly on a territorial basis – also African leaders (traditional chiefs involved in indirect rule, early converts to world religions, incipient intellectuals and politicians) seized the opportunity to transform these new labels and classifications into self-conscious units ('tribes', 'ethnic groups') and to claim, for these units, an identity, a 'culture', of their own (although this usually only amounted to the selection of a few distinctive cultural features as boundary markers), and a history of their own; this process is known as ethnicisation;
- in the absence of other social and religious distinctions, these ethnic classifications, and the local and regional contradictions they suggested by virtue of their being bound to a territory, became the incentives for group formation and for competition in national politics;
- formal politics along ethnic and regional lines also led to networks of patronage along which the elites, in exchange for political support, could offer specific advantages to their ethnic and regional followers; the latter had all the more need

for these advantages given the increasing failure of the formal institutions of the post-colonial state;

- even so, ethnicity in contemporary Africa retained a situational nature: some situations are far more ethnically marked than others; an increasing number of situations are, by the people involved in them, primarily constructed in terms of identities other than the ethnic identity, notably in terms of religion, gender, class, professional group, national state. Also, it frequently occurs that people in situations that are emphatically ethnically marked (such as migrants in the ethnically heterogeneous context of the modern city) operate alternately, and with success, in more than one ethnic identity. Or one sheds, at a given moment in life, the ethnic identity that one has had from birth – exchanging this identity either for another ethnic identity that has greater prestige or which represents a local majority. Finally, people may opt for a different, more universalist kind of identity (for example Muslim, or socialist) in the light of which the particularist ethnic identity becomes irrelevant. Here, a central thesis of contemporary ethnicity research meets the post-structuralist philosophy of Derrida: the idea of the self as forming a unity onto its own, is only a myth.¹

This raises the question as to the existence and nature of pre-colonial identities in Africa. In pre-colonial Africa a great diversity of languages, cultural customs, modes of production, systems of domination, and somatic traits could be discerned. Along each of these criss-crossing dimensions, identities (in the sense of named categories) may be defined in local contexts. These categories often had a perspectival nature: one could speak of ‘the northerners’, ‘the forest dwellers’, ‘those who seek to dissociate from the state’, depending on the opposite position occupied by the speaker himself. Many ethnonyms are rooted in the freezing and fossilisation of such perspectival designations, e.g. in Western Zambia: *Mbwela* (‘Northerners’), *Nkoya* (‘forest dwellers’), *Tonga* (‘shunning state control’; also the designation of four other groups in South Central Africa), and *Kwanga* (‘tired of the state’). But in other cases the designations derived from localised clans, which furthered the essentialist suggestion of a fixed, somatically anchored identity acquired by descent from a common ancestor. Pre-colonial states, such as occurred on a grand scale in Africa across several millennia, always displayed a plurality of languages, cultural orientations, modes of production, somatic features, and, besides the statal forms of domination, they tended to incorporate loosely such local forms of authority (authority within kin groups, territorial groups, cults, guilds, gender organisations) as constituted organisational alternatives to statehood. Not so much control over demarcated territories, but control over people (by means of courts of law, and the extraction of tribute in the form of produce and people), was the central theme of these states. Therefore pre-colonial boundaries must be conceived of in terms of areas of overlapping spheres of influence, and not as lines on a map.

¹ Derrida 1972.

It has been amply demonstrated that many colonial and pre-colonial ethnic designations in Africa have no roots in the pre-colonial past, and therefore must be very recent. The nomenclature of colonial and post-colonial identities in Africa derived *to a limited extent* from the extensive and complex repertoire of pre-colonial identities. However, it would be totally erroneous to claim (as African ethnic ideologues, Western journalists, and a declining number of researchers would do) that twentieth-century ethnicity in the African continent has merely been a continuation of pre-colonial patterns of group formation and group conflict. The above listed characteristics of twentieth-century ethnicity hardly obtained before the colonial state had established itself with its bureaucratic, named territorial divisions.

In the contemporary ideological construction of Africa by intellectuals, politicians and in the media both in Africa and in the North Atlantic region, as well as in the daily societal practice of many Africans themselves, ethnicity is to a large extent conceived as holistic and as bundled: language, cultural customs, modes of production, somatic features, territory, political leadership are then assumed to form one integrated package in such a way that a person's ethnic identity (that person's 'culture') is claimed to determine the *total mode of being* of that person. *Such bundling is a direct reproduction of the bureaucratic rationality that forms the framework for the political in postmodern North Atlantic society.* The various cultural orientations involved in a local situation are hierarchically ordered in such a way that one cultural orientation is privileged above the others, is essentialised, and is considered to be eminently constitutive for one person or for one group; this is the cultural orientation that is subsequently stressed as a result of public mediation. Thus 'culture' functions primarily as a performative boundary marker. By contrast, it was characteristic of pre-colonial identities that the various dimensions along which they could be defined remained detached from one another, were not mutually integrated, and as a result no single identity was capable of developing into a claim of totality that was publicly mediated. Instead the various identities within a region criss-crossed in a gaudy confusion.

All this allows us to understand why in their own personal vision of social life, many Africans have come to consider as an unshakeable reality the very tribal model that professional Africanists are rejecting today. Politicians can appeal to this reified and distorted image of social reality in order to lend an ethnic dimension to economic and political contradictions, thus essentialising these contradictions.

Given these historical and political backgrounds, it is difficult to offer a useful definition of ethnicity. However, the following is an attempt in that direction. Ethnicity is the way in which wider social processes have been economically, politically and culturally structured under reference to a plurality of ethnic groups that are distinguished and named within the collective space. A recognised ethnicity is not 'a culture', and a national or international political system is not an 'arena of cultures'. An ethnic group is nothing but an explicitly named set of people within a societal system of the classification and ranking of groups. Within the social field

(for example a society, a nation state) one distinguishes collectively a limited number of such named sets of people, always more than just one. Membership of such a set is considered to be acquired by birth and hence is in principle immutable, but in fact the acquisition of a new ethnic identity later in life is a common occurrence. Invariably more than one identity is invested in one person at the same time. Within each set of people, the members identify with one another, and are identified by others, on the grounds of a number of historically determined and historically mutable, specific ethnic boundary markers: the ethnic name itself, and moreover, for example, language, forms of leadership, modes of production, other distinctive cultural features, occasionally also somatic features. The ethnic groups that exist within one country often differ from each other only with respect to *a very limited selection of cultural features functioning as boundary markers*.

Concretely this means the following. From a Nkoya village in the heartland of Zambia one may trek (partly on the trail of David Livingstone in the middle of the 19th century CE) five hundred kilometres towards the north, east, west and south without noticing remarkable changes in the cultural, man-made landscape (the villages, the royal courts, the fields, the pastures, the fishing grounds, the hunting groups, shrines, and also ideas about kinship, law, witchcraft, adulthood, kingship, birth, maturation and death, the world, life after death, God); on one's journey one traverses a large number of so-called 'tribal areas' and language areas such as used to be distinguished in the colonial period. And whereas most local inhabitants will turn out to be multilingual, and while the languages of the Bantu linguistic family appear similar, as do Dutch, German and Swedish, after a few hundred kilometres one can no longer effectively communicate using the Nkoya language – but this will only be the case hundreds of kilometres after one has effectively left behind the recognised 'Nkoya tribal area' as defined in colonial times.

The great regional continuity of cultural orientations, in western Zambia as elsewhere in Africa, is an empirical fact; in a process of essentialisation, ethnonyms and other aspects of ethnicisation have imposed deceptive boundaries upon this continuity – more or less in the way one cuts out nicely shaped biscuits with a biscuit mould, from a large rolled out slab of dough that has virtually the same constitution throughout.

15.8. Beyond ethnography

In my opinion, the contemporary anthropological discourse on African ethnicity,¹ cultural diversity and cultural continuity contains the best possible arguments for my thesis that 'cultures do not exist'; these arguments are largely based on empirical ethnographic research. Therefore, let us stay a while with ethnography as a specific form of intercultural knowledge production.

¹ Amselle 1990; Amselle & M'bokolo 1985; Barth 1969; Chrétien & Prunier 1989; Fardon 1987; Gutkind 1970; Helm 1968; Vail 1989; van Binsbergen 1985a, 1992a = 1994c, 1997d.

The ethnographer situates her pronouncements in a social process, in the encounter and dialogue¹ between the ethnographer and the people she is writing about. This lends to ethnographic texts a character of their own, an anecdotal narrative accent that is often subversive vis-à-vis the quest for discursive appropriation, consistence, the imposition of sharp conceptual boundaries, and other similar types of ordering that tend to be characteristic of North Atlantic philosophical texts. Moreover, despite the great investment the cultural anthropologist has made towards mastering the local language, she does realise, as no other, that a large part of human manifestations is not framed in language and can hardly be expressed in language. Although ultimately anthropology is geared to the reduction of a large variety of human manifestations including non-language ones, to text, anthropology tends to the insight that language, although of unmistakable structuring potential, does not ultimately and totally determine the cultural domain, nor the full range of human cognition.

Profoundly inherent to anthropology is a recognition of the performative side of human behaviour. In the anthropological discipline the concepts of 'role' and 'role play' have turned out to be eminently successful as devices to link the individual and the social. The anthropologist realises that man shapes his social mode of existence by playing a role, with a very great degree of personal interpretation on the part of the role player, by loosely interpreting a social script, and not by the mechanical acting out of a fully determined, tightly programmed cultural inscription. Moreover the entire idea of the acquisition of cultural competence by means of participant observation is based on the notion of play: to the best of her ability the fieldworker plays, not the role of foreign researcher (for that role scarcely exists as an *emic* concept in most social contexts worldwide), but a number of roles that are being recognised and defined within the local society (friend, guest, kinswoman, lover, patron, client), and she tries to bend these roles so that they are not merely locally recognisable, but also instrumental for the main goal of her local residence in the host society: for the collection of information.

Even although she will occasionally have great doubt on this point, both in the field and during writing up, the ethnographer in principle takes for granted her capability of getting to know, through prolonged participant interaction, one of more cultural orientations from the inside and in their specific systematics. She also takes for granted that in this way she will ultimately be able to produce, by herself, forms of local overt behaviour that the original participants will recognise as more or less competent according to the local model. This production of local overt behaviour is increasingly competent (as it is constantly subjected to the participants' sanctions through their gaze, rejection, ridicule, encouragement). In the anthropologist's publicly displayed behaviour in the field, (her understanding of) the local model is articulated and made manifest much more directly and unmistakably than in the most dextrous interviews. For the anthropologist, participation is not only a source of

¹ Cf. Dwyer 1977.

primary information through observations and interviews, and not just a means to lower thresholds of communication by generating trust and demonstrating humility, it is the constant practical test of whether the anthropologist can apply in concrete situations, and under pressure, the local knowledge which she has gained in interviews and observation.

In the context of anthropological fieldwork as a knowledge acquiring practice, the term ‘participation’ has a totally different meaning from that which philosophers derive from the work of the French ethnologist Lévy-Bruhl¹ – for many philosophers their principal source of a furtive conceptualisation of humanity outside the North Atlantic region. For Lévy-Bruhl, who worked in the first half of the twentieth century, participation was a specific form of incomplete, diffuse and porous subjectivity allegedly characterising so-called ‘non-Western’ or – as one preferred to say then – ‘primitive’ man – a model of experience according to which the human subject does not juxtapose himself vis-à-vis the surrounding nature and society, but largely merges into them. By the same token, such juxtaposition was supposed to be characteristic of the logical rationality of the North Atlantic subject under the habitual conditions of modernity.

Anthropological participation in the context of fieldwork has a unique function of validation. Let us take as an example the learning of a foreign language through total immersion. Someone involved in such a process will produce speech acts, will submit these to native speakers for criticism and correction, and will thus gauge and improve his own skill in the local language. In the same (and overlapping) way participant observation furnishes a practical feedback to the implicit and explicit insights that a fieldworker may have gathered earlier in the same research through observation and conversations. Participating is, in the first instance, not an expression of exotism, not a form of going native or of risky loss of self, but simply an inductive and hence evidently incomplete form of empirical proof of a practical, interactive and reflective nature. If the fieldworker has actually arrived at some real knowledge and understanding of local cultural forms, then she is rewarded by the participants’ affirmative attitude and an increased flow of subsequent information; and in the opposite case she is punished by the participants’ rejection and a decrease in the subsequent flow of information. The more the fieldworker is defenceless, the more devoid of North Atlantic hegemonic protection, the more isolated from her home background, the stronger the social control that the participants can exert on her, and the more massive the flow of information and the greater, ultimately (provided the fieldworker can retain or regain her professional distance), the knowledge and insight gathered during fieldwork. The time-consuming and humble learning of a cultural orientation, including at least one of the local languages (local settings nearly always involve more than one language simultaneously), characterises anthropology as a form of intercultural knowledge on feedback basis. Moreover, knowledge production in participatory fieldwork takes place on both

¹ Lévy-Bruhl 1910, 1922, 1927, 1952.

verbal and non-verbal levels, leading to the ethnographer's textual renderings of the participants' own texts, as well as to the ethnographer's textual renderings of observations of non-verbal behaviour. Because of this much wider, non-verbal basis, firmly rooted in participation, the knowledge acquired in fieldwork derives from experience (often, as Parts II and III indicate, a profound and distressing experience) in ways that have scarcely parallels in the procedures of intercultural knowledge production so far pioneered by intercultural philosophers – unless the latter do fieldwork among 'sages', but then their techniques of elicitation and recording are often hopelessly defective.

Therefore, whatever may be theoretically wrong with fieldwork as a method for the production of intercultural knowledge, it appears to be *in principle* far superior to the forms of intercultural knowledge of philosophers, who tend to rely on texts, and usually on translated texts from foreign languages at that; I say 'in principle', because below I shall argue that this empirical advantage is largely forfeited by the epistemological naivety of anthropologists as compared to professional philosophers.

The role of researcher forces the anthropologist to adopt distance and instrumentality vis-à-vis the participants and their cultural orientations, but at the same time the internalisation of local cultural orientations works in exactly the opposite direction. Ethnographic fieldwork is a play of seducing and being seduced. It constantly suggests the possibility of such a boundary-crossing as the fieldworker desires, and in this suggestion the boundary between researcher and the researched, is not so much denied or perceived, but *constructed* in the first place. The researcher seeks to be seduced towards participation and knowledge; but the hosts also, in their turn, seduce through word and gesture in order to constantly shift and reduce the boundaries of access, knowledge, trust and intimacy¹ around which every anthropological fieldwork revolves.

In playing the game of fieldwork, is the ethnographer the lover or beloved *par excellence* of the society under study, or the cynical manipulator – or both? This question has occasionally been asked within the anthropological discipline.² But it addresses the foundation of that discipline to such an extent that it cannot be answered from within the confines of anthropology itself. Of old, the investigation of foundations has been shunned by anthropologists – complacently they are satisfied with their naïve empiricism.³ Anthropologists manage to do their work in fieldwork locations that tend to be distant and inhospitable, and here they think up spartan alternatives for the standard North Atlantic comforts that are temporarily denied to them. By the same token, they are inclined to improvise their way when it comes to epistemological and methodological foundations, thinking up their own solutions

¹ Cf. Kristeva 1983.

² Cf. the exchange between Wolf Bleek (= Sjaak van der Geest) and myself in *Human Organization* (Bleek 1979; van Binsbergen 1979b) and van Binsbergen 1986-87.

³ Exceptions are: Salamone 1979; MacGaffey 1986; Kloos 1996; Olivier de Sardan 1995; Todorov 1988; Sperber 1985; Kaplan 1984; Roth 1989.

and, if they seek help in the process, limiting their search to the writings of fellow anthropologists. But often this does not yield enough.

In view of the reputation (as being highly philosophical) of Johannes Fabian's seminal book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*,¹ I was surprised to see, upon a recent re-reading, that its explicit philosophical references are in fact virtually limited to Baudrillard, Foucault, Hobbes, Ricoeur and Schutz.² Another explicitly philosophically orientated book written by an anthropologist, that by my late friend and colleague Peter Kloos on the philosophy of anthropology,³ deals with only an odd selection of philosophical problems in anthropology: the Popperian and logical positivist underpinning – not of fieldwork-based ethnography on one community (which is by far the most standard form of anthropological knowledge production) but of comparative anthropology (i.e. cross-cultural studies). Of fieldwork, mainly the ethical problems of fieldwork in unmistakably imperialist situations are treated. Even so, Fabian and Kloos display a philosophical competence that is absolutely exceptional among anthropologists in Dutch-language environments, with the exception of such (post)Roman Catholic fortresses as Nijmegen and Louvain, full of (mainly ex-) priests and ex-students for the priesthood, whose standard stock-in-trade has been a decent two-years' philosophical training. Characteristically, philosophy has not been part of the secondary school curriculum in the Netherlands, although this situation is about to change. In French, German and American cultural anthropology, incidental reference to contemporary philosophy is rather more usual and is beginning to become fashionable; but even there it is rare to find specific studies exploring the relationship between both disciplines.⁴

Used to roughing it under fieldwork conditions, anthropologists hate to throw away something that may yet come in handy. At the present moment, when philosophy has virtually turned away from the concept of the autonomous subject and from body/mind dualism as two major pillars of modernity, we witness how the autonomous subject, acting consciously and constructing his world on that basis, settles comfortably as the central point of departure of mainstream anthropology – where transactionalist actor approaches on the basis of methodological individualism have been popular since the 1960s; since the end of the 1980s this paradigm has gained massive political support in that the concept of the market as a maximalising strategy has become the ideological keynote of North Atlantic society. At the present moment when post-structuralist (which often comes down to: *anti*-structuralist) approaches, with considerable delay, seep into anthropology, the structuralist method

¹ Fabian 1983. By a remarkable coincidence, Fabian's title is identical to that of a book published by Levinas in the same year in French. Levinas does not play a role in Fabian's argument; cf. Levinas 1983.

² Baudrillard 1976; Foucault 1973; Hobbes 1962; Ricoeur 1975; Schutz 1977, 1990.

³ Kloos 1987.

⁴ Interesting attempts, however, may be found in: Aya 1996; Azoulay 1994; Bateson 1975; Carruthers *et al.* 1985; Goldstein 1957; Hudson 1989; Jackson 1989; Kaplan 1984; Larson & Deutsch 1988; Leeuw 1987; Müller *et al.* 1984; Northrop & Livingston 1964; Passaro 1997; Salamone 1979; Skorupski 1976.

for the analysis of myths and rites turns out, nonetheless, to have installed itself among the standard professional analytical toolkit of the anthropologist. In the same vein, neo-Marxism as an all-encompassing anthropological paradigm of the 1970s has by far been left behind today, but what has remained, also as part of the lasting tool kit of the anthropologist, is the model of the articulation of modes of production, that could not have been formulated but for Marx's work on the Asiatic mode of production and on other non-Western societies. Used to dissimulate the contradictions of intercultural mediation or to encapsulate these contradictions in what would appear to be personal idiosyncracies (cf. my own *sangomahood* as discussed in Part III), rather than to think them through in general analytical terms, anthropologists evidently do not aspire to systematic consistency. In practice they are arch-eclectics.

Philosophers are infinitely more sophisticated on these points. From their self-image composed of intellectual passion, broad intellectual exchange, interdisciplinarity, and their intimate knowledge of the intellectual genealogies of concepts and schools of thought, they can scarcely imagine the specific dynamics of cultural anthropology as a discipline where the echoes of the wider intellectual climate of our time are heard only with great retardation, at the cost of considerable intra-disciplinary resistance, and often deformed beyond recognition. For instance, the Nietzschean distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian was appropriated by Ruth Benedict in her popular introductory work *Patterns of Culture*, half a century later.¹ The critique of anthropology for being imperialist (early 1970s) arose in the aftermath of the anti-imperialism permeating the left-wing intellectual and philosophical climate in continental Europe during the 1950s and 1960s. Likewise, we have seen the rise of post-structuralist and postmodern anthropology, a few decades after postmodernism was the intellectual fashion in architecture, literature and philosophy. A nice example of oblique anthropological philosophising is also the book *Culture and Practical Reason* by Marshall Sahlins, who for years was leader of one of the world's most renowned departments of anthropology, that at the University of Chicago.² For any philosopher Sahlins' title would, in the first place, refer to Kant;³ however, Sahlins' approach has nothing whatsoever to do with Kant – there is a deliberate non-reference.⁴

Only once or twice did anthropology manage to take the initiative in the definition of the wider intellectual climate – notably in the rise of the concept of 'culture', and in Lévi-Strauss's version of structuralism (which however, as is generally known, was amply prepared for by linguistic, sociological and psychoanalytic developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century).

¹ Benedict 1946; cf. Nietzsche 1872. Also cf. Barnouw 1949.

² Sahlins 1976.

³ Kant 1783c (*Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 1781/1787).

⁴ Cf. Drechsel 1984.

Hardly any traces can be found today of what was Wittgenstein's gift to anthropology: the promising discussion, as from the late 1950s, of rationality, magic, and the recognition of the truth problem such as is posed by the belief systems of cultural orientations different from one's own.¹ Selected anthropologists did realise that the phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches in philosophy are extraordinarily well suited for the problematisation of the cultural practices of others both within and outside one's own society; however, once these approaches have been introduced into anthropology (by Geertz, among others) they have been localised and canonised there, and few anthropologists still reach for the original phenomenological texts. In Geertz's approach the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' description correspond with that between *emic* and *etic*. Geertz has rendered anthropology a somewhat doubtful service by adapting Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics to what Geertz thought were the requirements of ethnography.² It amounted to a major *coup de force*: notably, the decision to consider as *texts* all the pluriform events – including non-language ones – that lend themselves to ethnographic description. A quarter of a century later – under the influence of the further elaboration of textual theories in literature science – this conception has led, among a minority of anthropologists, to a hermetic view of the ethnographic corpus as complete, introverted, and as detached from the dynamics of social relationships in the social domain that is situated around that corpus and to which that corpus refers in important ways.³

If phenomenology only found its way into anthropology at considerable costs and with considerable delay, the development of an anthropological discourse based on Foucault is today – one and a half decades after Foucault's death – becoming a respectable anthropological pastime.⁴ The anthropological reception of Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari is still in its infancy.

Postmodernism only reached anthropology by the late 1980s.⁵ Never has there been so much discussion of modernity in anthropology as in the last few years, often in terms of modernity being a condition that, although still highly coveted among our African subjects of inquiry, has already passed, has already lost its magical appeal, has already been overtaken by postmodernity, among North Atlantic anthropologists themselves in their personal lives as well as in their writings. This does not take

¹ Cf. the above footnote on the discussion initiated by Winch (section 15.3.4); as is clear from the extensive list of references there, that discussion – however shunned by most contemporary anthropologists – has become a fixed point of orientation within African philosophy.

² Cf. Clifford 1988b: 38f; Ricoeur 1971; Geertz 1973, 1976, 1983; Agar 1980.

³ For a regrettable, though by its own standards impressive, example of such an approach to ethnography, cf. Drews 1995.

⁴ For instance, the work, very influential in contemporary anthropology, by Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, 1991-97. This does not take away the fact that Foucault had already been signalled much earlier by a handful of anthropologists such as Rabinow and Clifford, as well as by the anthropologically-inclined literature scholar *cum* philosopher Mudimbe.

⁵ Cf. Geuijen 1992.

away the fact that the majority of anthropologists have tacitly taken a curious position in the debate on modernity and postmodernity. For the ethnographer is, on the one hand – the postmodern aspect – the champion of the specific, the local, and the vernacular (the *emic* side); but, on the other hand, this often serves as merely a stepping-stone towards something else: towards an attempt to search – and this is the typically modernist aspect of the ethnographic practice – in the local for subsequent generalisations that transcend the local context. This search is informed by the construction of the publishable ethnographic text, and by the general anthropological concepts and theories that feature in such a text as a wider framework (the *etic* side). In this way the specific, local and vernacular is on the one hand – after postmodern fashion – claimed to be ‘other’ in a unique way that does not allow a relative view; but, on the other hand, that very same local aspect is – after modernist fashion – dragged along to a dialectics that subsumes that otherness as part of a larger whole, a no-longer-other, an Other reduced to sameness. The anthropologist balances between modernity and postmodernity, in an inimitable circus act that philosophers can very well deconstruct but that they would scarcely feel tempted to emulate.

An important factor in the relative intellectual isolation of the anthropological discipline has been the fact that that discipline has also attracted a remarkable number of outsiders: Jews, women, homosexuals, working-class children like myself, migrants, and moreover the spiritual heirs of the explorers, big-game hunters and missionaries of the nineteenth century – so many people who were less welcome in the more established academic disciplines, or who could not take root there. Moreover we can point to a process of professionalisation that has persisted throughout the twentieth century and that brought about the tendency for anthropologists and other social scientists preferably to dissociate themselves from, and antagonise, the very fields of scholarship with which they would have the greatest affinity in terms of problematic and method: philosophical anthropology, history, classics, comparative legal studies, comparative religious studies, linguistics. Instead, anthropologists and their fellow social scientists sought counsel with the natural sciences and the latter’s methodologies and epistemologies. As a result a superficial scientism is often the only, obsolete, philosophical baggage of anthropologists. Besides, many anthropologists combine a rigid orientation towards societies outside the North Atlantic region with myopia, not to say contempt, vis-à-vis the social, political and intellectual current events taking place in their own social, political and academic surroundings beyond anthropology proper.

For decades the distinction between *emic* and *etic* has been one of the most powerful tools among cultural anthropologists in order to define and approach their knowledge object and the procedures of their knowledge construction. A few years ago the leading logician Quine gave his philosophical *nihil obstat* to the paired concepts.¹ Yet the distinction, however useful, may easily be criticised. It is cast in the form of a binary opposition, which also provides the standard framework for

¹ Quine 1990a.

Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, and implausibility of which as a basic unit of culture has been argued in that context. Bhabha demonstrates (in a way inspired by Derrida's deconstruction of binary oppositions) that colonial practice took shape, not so much by virtue of the binary oppositions that were imposed by the colonial rulers, but by the fuzzy, inconsistent ways in which these binary oppositions were in fact applied.¹ The distinction moreover posits a modernist juxtaposition between knowing subject (the ethnographer) and known object (the participants, their conscious cultural orientation, and, beyond that, the underlying postulated reality as reconstructed by the ethnographer). Thus the distinction raises fundamental political and ethical questions concerning the subordinating, even dehumanising nature of the Other's analytical (*etic*) gaze.² Our judgement of the distinction cannot be detached from the debate concerning the controversial claim³ of access to a privileged meta-position where an analyst (for example the ethnographer) pretends to escape from her own social and cultural determination, as well as from the intercontinental hegemonic structures of domination. Here we had better remind ourselves that what we intend as *etic* (as analytical, as meta-cultural) in all probability merely amounts to our own local *emic* raised to an undeserved status of universality and cultural neutrality. Notably, the *etic* perspective is opposed to a dialogical, intersubjective (in the sense of: between fieldworker and local participants), *emic* perspective of knowledge production, such as is being preferred today. On the other hand, the *etic* approach is in line with another and equally cherished ideal of knowledge production: it is boundary-effacing in this respect that it allows us (not only the ethnographer and the international academic community, but also the local bearers of the cultural orientation under study) to liberate ourselves from the chains of collective positions that have once been adopted and that are being mediated by the *emic* approach.⁴ In other words, to the extent to which the *emic* approach mediates the collective representations of others, to that extent the *etic* approach may be said to liberate us from such (inevitably parochial, local, particularistic) collective representations, thus opening up space for our own properly scientific explorations that tend to universality and that should strive to be as free as possible from local collective representations including our own. Moreover the *etic* approach reminds us of the unintended and unpredicted effects of socio-cultural arrangements – social implications of which the actors cannot possibly be conscious and which therefore

¹ Bhabha 1986; Young 1995.

² Sartre 1943; Luijpen 1980: 280f. The danger of reduction of the other to self is also a recurrent theme in Levinas' work, cf. Levinas 1972, 1983; Becker 1981; Bernasconi 1986.

³ For a Foucaultian critique of this illusion, based on the concept of genealogy (which is ultimately Nietzschean), see: Rabinow 1984; Foucault 1977. Cf. also Kimmerle 1985; and: Nietzsche 1887. The impossibility of an epistemological Archimedean point is also argued in: Rorty 1979; and from a totally different point of view in: Putnam, 1978, 1981. Such impossibility, in other words, is a received idea in contemporary philosophy.

⁴ Cf. Koepfig 1984; van Binsbergen 1984a.

cannot be approached from an *emic* perspective.¹ Because of its distancing from the local cultural specificity to which only the fieldworker herself has scientific access, it is precisely the *etic* perspective that promises to provide a solution with regard to the intradisciplinary intersubjectivity in intercultural knowledge production. All in all, the distinction *emic/etic* clearly brings out the fundamental dilemmas of cultural anthropology today.

Despite the relative intellectual isolation of anthropology, we can identify in the wider philosophical climate of our time a number of developments that have greatly undermined classic anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s. The rise of an explicit discourse on alterity, in feminism, anti-colonialism and anti-racism, inevitably had a negative effect on the credibility of the anthropological project as 'the science of the other, of other cultures'. Johannes Fabian's book *Time and the Other* has been a major factor in introducing these critical themes into anthropology.² This movement converged with that of postmodernism, that proclaimed the end of all Grand Narratives, thus debunking Grand Theory as a totalitarian illusion.³ Was not the Grand Narrative a strategy, not for revealing the truth, but for concealing it? Was not the great narrative of anthropology a way of speaking, not about the other, but rather about ourselves as participants, partisans, in a process of North Atlantic hegemonic intellectual and ideological subjugation of the world at large? The anti-imperialist critics of anthropology in the 1970s (Asad, Copans, Said)⁴ were still following a Marxist inspiration, but the post-colonial theory approach by such writers as Spivak and Rattansi⁵ reveals the potential also of post-structuralism/philosophy of difference for bringing out the problems of knowledge production on an intercontinental scale – notwithstanding the North Atlantic entrenchment of most post-structuralist philosophers themselves.

In the course of the last few decades this type of critique has demonstrated that cultural anthropology is so profoundly formed and informed by North Atlantic projects of domination (colonialism, imperialism, worldwide hegemony) that we can scarcely believe any more that this discipline could take a distance from these antecedents without giving up its disciplinary identity. The inequality between the ethnographer and the group under study in terms of control over the central medium ('participant observation' and 'a textual ethnography') takes care of the fact that, even with the best of intentions, deformations of representation are bound to occur. Since the production of text is ultimately a technology of human control, even the best *emic* representations are bound to be misused for intellectual domination. The ethnographer has an unshakeable belief that it is possible to report adequately on the

¹ Merton 1968: 51; Hayek 1973-1978.

² Fabian 1983.

³ Lyotard 1979.

⁴ Asad 1973; Copans 1975; Said 1978.

⁵ Rattansi 1994; Boyne & Rattansi 1990; Donald & Rattansi 1992; Spivak 1987, 1988, 1990.

knowledge acquired during fieldwork, even if this means reporting in a language that, in principle, is totally different from the one used in the original ethnographic context. The formal academic language of professional ethnography is inaccessible to most of the people whose socio-cultural practices are described in that language. Ethnographers (including those ethnographers who call themselves intercultural philosophers) can only claim credibility provided that, in their fieldwork and in the production of their published texts, ample provision¹ has been made to turn their ethnography into a form of ‘communicative action’.² This requires not only that (along *emic* lines) the participants’ representations and evaluations are, to the ethnographer’s personal conviction, mediated faithfully and with integrity, but also *that the participants have a decisive say in this process of mediation*. Only on that basis can ethnographic mediation become a form of a self-reflexive awareness-taking (*prise de conscience*) that is in line with the participants’ own local cultural orientation,³ and that enables the underlying epistemological principles of that orientation to effectively fertilise, or transcend, North Atlantic empirical epistemology.

15.9. From ethnography to intercultural philosophy: Beyond the ethnographic epistemology

We are in need of an academic medium that clearly does not have such hegemonic roots as cultural anthropology; and of practitioners of that medium who, because of their background or their radical reorientation later in life, do not take part in that hegemonic process,⁴ or seek to disentangle themselves from it. Intercultural philosophy is a discipline attracting, among others, intellectuals from outside the North Atlantic region. To some extent, African philosophy is even reserved for Africans. Many intercultural and African philosophers conduct – often in a strongly introspective manner – ethnography on the spur of their own knowledge and understanding of one of their cultural orientations (that of their home village), against the background of their command both of their mother tongue and of an international language and idiom of academic communication. Obviously, such researchers are greatly privileged as compared to foreign ethnographers. However, even these philosophers are involved in a process of mediation that springs from the fact that, among their various cultural orientations, the cultural orientation called ‘cosmopolitan philosophy’ plays a very important role. In this situation there is a real danger of nostalgic and performative projections on their part;⁵ explicit empirical

¹ For an example of such a strategy, cf. van Binsbergen 1992b: 58f.

² Habermas 1982.

³ Chapters 2 and 4

⁴ Cf. Chilungu 1984.

⁵ Cf. chapter 14, where I argue this point in connection with the Southern African *ubuntu* philosophy.

methods strengthening intra-disciplinary intersubjectivity are absolutely indispensable here. A profound awareness of the great challenges on this point distinguishes such cosmopolitan African philosophers as Mudimbe¹ and Appiah from their essentialising predecessors of an earlier generation.

The main issue here is not a Northern hereditary burden allegedly preventing Northerners from producing valid intercultural knowledge about the South, nor a Southern birthright to a monopoly on valid knowledge production about the South, but a radical revolution in our approach to the cultural other. To the extent to which cultural anthropology has entrenched itself in the posed naïveté of an eclectic, apolitical, but fundamentally Eurocentric empiricism, it is only intercultural philosophy that may open our eyes to the epistemological implications of cultural anthropology.

In cultural anthropology statements of certain types are eligible to be assessed as true or false:

- the ethnographer's statement to the effect that her ethnographic description of concrete *emic* details is valid
- the ethnographer's statement to the effect that her abstract theoretical *etic* analysis is valid
- the individual informants' statements that they render facts, representations and rules validly.

There is however a fourth type of statement that cultural anthropologists absolutely exclude from the question concerning truth:

- the participants' statements to the effect that their collective representations are a valid description of reality (both in its sensory and in its meta-sensory aspect, visible and invisible, etc.)²

Following the later Wittgenstein, Winch has shown us that the truth of the latter type of statement cannot be established in general and universally, but depends on the language-specific, meaning-defining form of life that is at hand. Whether in a certain society witches do or do not exist, cannot be answered with any universal statement to the effect that witches do exist, or do not exist, but can only be answered by reference to the specific forms of life at hand in that society – and of such forms of life there are always more than one at the same time and place.³ The concept of form of life has much in common with my concept of 'cultural orientation' (of which likewise more than one are involved in any society at the same

¹ Mudimbe 1988, 1991, 1992b; Mudimbe & Appiah 1993; Appiah 1992; Jewsiewicki & Mudimbe 1993. Cf. van Binsbergen 2001a.

² Cf. Lewis 1981.

³ Winch 1970: 100f; Sogolo 1993; Jarvie 1972.

time). Now, cultural relativism as a central professional point of departure of classic anthropology may perhaps imply, theoretically, that the exclusion of this fourth category originates in something as laudable as the anthropologist's *respect* for whatever is true in the other form of life or cultural orientation; but in practice it nearly always comes down to following. However much the ethnographer has invested in the acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge so that local collective representations can be unsealed for her, and however much she gradually internalises these collective representations as a private person – yet in her professional formal utterances (in the form of academic ethnographic writing-up) she does not give the collective representations she has studied the benefit of the doubt, nor the respect she pretends to be due to the collectively other. The tacit point of departure of the cultural anthropological professional practice (and in this respect it does not distance itself from North Atlantic society as a whole) is: Collective representations of other societies under study cannot be true, unless they coincide one hundred percent with the collective representations of the researcher's own society of origin. Of course, both the researcher's society of origin and the cultural orientation under study construct, each in their turn and in a highly different way, a truth-creating life-world in the form of a texture of collective representations. This is a situation suggestive of a relativist approach in so far as it would *by definition* be impossible for us to choose between these truths on the basis of an *emic* perspective. *But according to the conventions of ethnography such a life-world is to be one-sidedly broken down if it is the Other's life-world, and must be left intact if it is the researcher's own.* Just try to realise what this means for the confrontation, throughout the modern world, in institutional, political and media settings, between such major and powerful North Atlantic institutional complexes as democracy, medicine, education, Christianity, and pre-existing local alternatives in the respective fields. The anthropologist may pay lip-service to these local alternatives for humanitarian and aesthetic reasons but – for her own sanity and professional survival (not as a impassioned researcher but as a permanent member of her own home society) she has to abide by the adage that they cannot be true.¹

Born in the Netherlands (1947), I was trained at the municipal university of my home town as a social scientist specialising in the anthropology of religion. From my first fieldwork (1968), when I investigated saint worship and the ecstatic cult in rural North Africa, I have struggled with this problem of the fourth type of truth – which I am inclined to consider as the central problem of interculturality. With gusto I sacrificed to the dead saints in their graves, danced along with the ecstatic dancers, experienced the beginning of mystical ecstasy myself, built an entire network of fictive kinsmen around me. Yet in my ethnography I reduced the very same people to numerical values in a quantitative analysis, and I knew of no better way to describe their religious representations than as the denial of North Atlantic or

¹ This argument is carried forward, or so I intended, in the Introduction to this book.

cosmopolitan natural science.¹ It was only twenty years later when, in the form of a novel (*Een Buik Openen*, i.e. *Opening a Belly*, published in 1988)² I found the words to testify to my love for and indulgence in the North African forms of life that I had had to keep at a distance as an ethnographer and as a member of North Atlantic society; and my two-volume, English-language book manuscript on this research, after lying idly on a shelf for decades, is only now approaching publication – now that I am beginning to see my way out of the epistemological and ethical problems attending the hegemonic rationality of my first fieldwork and writing-up period. In the course of many years and of four subsequent African fieldwork locations, always operating in the religious and the therapeutic domain, I gradually began to realise that I loathed the cynical professional attitude of anthropology, and that I had increasing difficulty sustaining that attitude. My apprenticeship at the University of Zambia (1971-1974) as a young lecturer and researcher in social science in very close collaboration with such radical scholars as Jack Simons and Jaap van Velsen, in an intellectual climate consistently and incessantly preparing for the democratic liberation of South Africa (in which struggle Jack Simons and his life's companion Ray Alexander played a major part), reinforced the radical political lessons I had received from the Asianist Wim Wertheim as a student. As a result I began to shed the blunt positivism that (under the influence of my more specifically anthropological teachers, and of my first wife who is an experimental physicist) had attended my first fieldwork. I became aware of scholarship's political and ethical responsibilities, and of the potential humiliation and betrayal of the people under study by social researchers in the field. In subsequent years, I was to ask myself more and more the following question: *Who was I that I could afford to make-believe, to pretend, on those very points that attracted the undivided serious commitment of my research participants?* Several among them have played a decisive role in my life, as role models, teachers, spiritual masters, loved ones. Experiencing their religion and ritual as an idiom (a symbolic technology) of sociability which I was privileged to share, I could not forever bear the tension of joining them in the field and betraying them outside the field.

In Guinea-Bissau, in 1983, I did not remain just the observer of the oracular priests I had come to study, but I also became their patient – like almost all the native-born members of the local society were. In the town of Francistown, Botswana, from 1988, under circumstances that I have discussed in Part III – the usual form of fieldwork became so unbearable to me that I had to throw overboard all professional considerations. I became not only the patient of local diviner-priests (*sangomas*), but at the end of a long therapy course ended up as one of them, and thus as a socially recognised and certified believer in the local collective representations. At the time I justified this primarily as a political deed, from me as a White man in a part of Africa (Botswana's Northeast District) that had been

¹ Van Binsbergen 1980a, 1980b; 1985b, forthcoming (c).

² Van Binsbergen 1988a.

disrupted by White monopoly capitalism and White racism. Now, more than then, I realise that it was also and primarily an epistemological position-taking – a revolt against the professional hypocrisy in which the hegemonic perspective of anthropology reveals itself. It was a position-taking that almost expelled me from cultural anthropology and that created the conditions for the step which I finally made when occupying my present chair in intercultural philosophy.

This step means a liberation, in the first place from an empirical habitus (social anthropology) that, along with existential distress, has also yielded me plenty of intellectual delight, adventure, remuneration, and honours; and, in the second place, liberation from such far-reaching spiritual dependence (as a transference-based re-enactment of infantile conflict) on my mentors and fellow cult members as originally characterised my *sangomahood*. Becoming a *sangoma* was a concrete, practical deed of transgression in answer to the contradictions of a practice of intercultural knowledge production that I had engaged in for decades, with increasing experience and success. Becoming an intercultural philosopher means a further step: one that amounts to integrating that transgressive deed in a systematic, reflective and intersubjective framework, in order to augment the anecdotal, autobiographical ‘just so’ account with theoretical analysis, and to explore the wider social, political, theoretical and epistemological relevance of an individual experience. For what is at stake here is not merely an autobiographical anecdote. If I have struggled with intercultural knowledge production, then my problem coincides with that of the modern world as a whole, where intercultural knowledge production constitutes one of the two or three greatest challenges. If it is possible for me to be, concurrently, a Botswana *sangoma*, a Dutch professor, husband and father, and an adoptive member of a Zambian royal family, while at the same time burdened by sacrificial obligations, cultural affinities and fictive kin relationships from North and West Africa, then this does not just say something about me – a me that is torn (but not desperately so) between various commitments, that is postmodern, boundless; one who has lost his original home but (after finding, and losing again, new physical and spiritual homes in Africa) realises that the construction of homes is as arbitrary and full of risks as it is indispensable and universal among humans (even if one may ultimately find a relatively secure home with one’s loved ones and in one’s professional practices). Provided we take the appropriate distance and apply the appropriate analytical tools, such a state of affairs in my personal life also says something about whatever ‘culture’ is and what it is not. It implies that (*at least in the modern world*) culture is not bounded, not tied to a place, not unique but multiple, not impossible to combine, blend and transgress, not tied to a human body, an ethnic group, a birth right. And it suggests that ultimately we are much better off as nomads between a plurality of cultures, than as self-imposed prisoners of a smug Eurocentrism (or Afrocentrism, for that matter).

15.10. From ethnography to intercultural philosophy: Long-range correspondences in space and time

In the 1990s my road from ethnographer to intercultural philosopher was to take me on a further exploration of the relativity of cultural specificity (hence by implication the deconstruction of cultural relativism). Once I had become a *sangoma*, I had at my disposal a fairly unique body of cultural knowledge, and a fairly unique status – the status of recognised local religious specialist; but my move to become a diviner-priest-therapist would be rendered meaningless if as a next step I merely committed this knowledge to writing in a standard ethnographic monograph, with all the distancing and subordinating objectification this entails. Nor could I bring myself to write about the details of the social and psychiatric case material that automatically came my way as the therapist of my Botswana patients. What to do? Could I find a perspective from which my intercultural stance might yet be combined with a recognisable professional form of scientific knowledge production?

I had now in my possession these mysterious rough wooden tablets of the *sangoma* oracle, consecrated in the blood of my sacrificial goats, and periodically revived by the application of fat (from these victims, or bought as packaged neo-traditional medicine) and by immersion in water of a year's first rain. I could throw these tablets, and interpret the sixteen different combinations they could assume in terms of an elaborate interpretative catalogue that I had gradually learned during my training as a *sangoma*; the interpretation would yield me knowledge of the ancestors' wishes, messages and grudges, would reveal a patient's life history to me, as well as his current illness and venues for cure and redress. The tablets seemed to represent the epitome of strictly local cultural particularism. It was as if they had risen from the village soil of Southern Africa at some indefinite Primordial Age, and the same seemed to apply to the interpretation scheme that names the sixteen specific combinations which may be formed by the tablets when these are ritually cast. The local oracle of four tablets had been described by missionaries as long as four hundred years ago.¹ 'The old woman like a stone', 'the old male witch like an axe', 'itching pubic hair like a young woman's', 'the uvula like a youthful penis' – this is how the four tablets are locally circumscribed, and their various combinations have connotations of witchcraft, ancestors, taboos, sacrificial dances, and all varieties of local animal totems. What could be more authentic and more African? Not for nothing had I, at the time, described my initiation (which, after more than twenty years of work as a religious and medical anthropologist, made me an accomplished and recognised specialist in an African divination and therapy system) as

'the end point of a quest to the heart of Africa's symbolic culture'.²

¹ Cf. dos Santos 1901; van Binsbergen 1996b.

² Van Binsbergen 1991b: 314, = chapter 5; obviously I then used the concept of 'culture' in a different sense from my present argument.

However, the illusion of immense local authenticity would soon blow up in my face. Before long I had to admit that this romantic suggestion of extreme locality was mere wishful thinking, under which lurked a reality that had enormous consequences for my theoretical and existential stance as an ethnographer and a world citizen. The interpretational scheme, right up to the nomenclature of the sixteen combinations, turned out to be an adaptation of tenth-century (CE) Arabian magic, with a Chinese iconography (consisting, just as in the *I Ching*,¹ out of configurations of whole and broken lines), and, in addition, astrological implications such as had been elaborated another fifteen or twenty centuries earlier in Babylonia. The local cultural orientation in which the inhabitants of Francistown had entrenched themselves, and from which I initially felt painfully excluded, turned out not to be the incarnation of absolute and unbridgeable otherness at all, but – just like my own cultural orientation as a North Atlantic scholar – a distant offshoot of the civilisations of the Ancient Near East, and like my own branch of science it appeared to have been effectively fertilised by an earlier offshoot from the same stem: the Arabian civilisation.² *I had struggled with the other, as if it were an unassailable, utterly alien totality; but parts of it turned out, on second thoughts, to be familiar and kindred, and available for appropriation.*

Clearly, such a position smacks of the denial of difference in favour of an imposed claim of sameness, and was destined to make me extremely unpopular (as I was to find out bitterly) among the small group of intercultural philosophers, for reasons discussed above (section 15.3.4). But, at the time, anthropologists still constituted my main frame of reference. And among them, the insights derived from my *sangoma* divination study have led to a head-on collision with the central theory of classic cultural anthropology since the 1930s:³ the historical and cultural specificity of distinct, for instance African, societies, the assumption of their being closed onto themselves and bounded, of their having a unique internal integration and systematics, in general the idea that something like ‘a culture’ exists, and the absence, or irrelevance, of comprehensive, long-range cultural connections in time and space.

This insight was for me the trigger to start a comprehensive research project, which has meanwhile resulted, among other publications, in an edited collection *Black Athena: Ten Years After* (1997; now being reprinted as *Black Athena Alive*), on the work of Martin Bernal; a book manuscript entitled *Global Bee Flight: Sub-Saharan Africa, Ancient Egypt and the World: Beyond the Black Athena Thesis*; one on *Four tablets: A Southern African Divination System Traced in Space and Time*;

¹ From numerous discussions of this Ancient Chinese divinatory text I mention: Legge 1993; Jung 1974a; Wilhelm 1948.

² Van Binsbergen 1994d, 1995a, 1996b, 1996c, 1996e, 1999f, forthcoming (b).

³ This is no exaggeration, cf. the extensive criticism of this line in my work by Amselle 2001: 53f; Amselle’s disgust is so great that he can only understand my defence of Afrocentricity as an act of sheer opportunism – which I then happen to share, much to my honour and pleasure, with another target of Amselle’s, Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch, one of France’s leading African historians (Amselle 2001: 109f and n. 90).

and another one entitled *Cupmarks, Stellar Maps, and Mankala Board Games: An Archaeoastronomical and Africanist Excursion into Palaeolithic World Views*. These books are all in the final stages of preparation for publication and will appear from 2003 onwards. I also embarked on comparative historical studies of animal symbolism, one of which, *The Leopard's Unchanging Spots*, is a direct by-product of the present book.

Global Bee Flight is based on a similar *Through the Looking-Glass* (Lewis Carroll)¹ experience as I had in connection with the Francistown divination system. A few years ago I went through my various articles on western Zambian kingship in order to collect these into a single volume. This was shortly after I had spent a year at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) in 1994-95, as the only anthropological member of the Working Group on 'Magic and religion in the Ancient Near East'. After this extensive exposure my eye was suddenly and unexpectedly caught by the many specific and profound parallels between the ceremonies and mythologies surrounding Nkoya kingship in South Central Africa, and in Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and South Asia. The parallels were so striking, so detailed, that I had to consider seriously the possibility of cultural diffusion, either way or both ways, between these various regions and South Central Africa – once again the suggestion of continuities in space and time across thousands of kilometres and across several millennia.

The Francistown divination system and Nkoya kingship are two concrete examples of the kind of serendipities – totally unexpected finds – of cultural convergence and diffusion across the entire Old World that have occupied a central place in my empirical research since 1990. But there is also a more systematic source of inspiration: the anthropological fieldwork that I have undertaken over the past thirty-odd years in various locations on the African continent. In some of these African settings I have been treated more as a stranger than in others, but I have always felt myself to be on fundamentally familiar grounds in Africa, in human life-worlds I could readily explore, understand (their beautiful languages were surprisingly quickly picked up), love and even anticipate, full of situations that reverberated deep-seated affinities, instead of in alien and exotic abodes of exile that made no sense to me and left me a total stranger.² In combination with the scholarly literature, discussions with my colleagues, and with my involvement in the work of my Leiden colleagues and of my research students, these researches have created a context for comparative hypotheses suggesting considerable correspondences between local cultural orientations far beyond the strictly local and presentist horizons of classic ethnography – far beyond 'cultures'

¹ Carroll 1998.

² The topic of Afro-European or Eur-African cultural and historical continuities is pursued at length in van Binsbergen, forthcoming (a), (e), cf. 1997c.

15.11. Against Eurocentrism

Against this background I immediately recognised a kindred spirit in Martin Bernal, the author of the multi-volume book *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classic Civilization*.¹

Bernal intends to expose the Eurocentrism that – as he demonstrates – has been at the roots of the North Atlantic study of Graeco-Roman Antiquity over the past two centuries. In Bernal's opinion, the widespread idea of being heirs to the genius of Greek civilisation, allegedly without roots in any previous non-European civilisation, has played a major role in the justification of European intercontinental imperialism. His central thesis is that we must recognise the African and Asiatic roots of classical Greek civilisation (especially of its language, philosophy and religion) – and in doing so, we should also recognise the non-European roots of major cultural orientations in today's North Atlantic civilisation, that is becoming increasingly global anyway. Hence the pragmatic title of Bernal's magnum opus, *Black Athena*: this title refers to Bernal's (and Herodotus's) claim that the goddess Athena, although the central symbol of classical Greek civilisation, had yet an origin outside Europe, in Africa. The question is not without interest for philosophers in that the principal stake in the *Black Athena* debate is the claim concerning the non-European origin of the European philosophical tradition.²

With *Black Athena: Ten Years After* (1997)³ I reopened the debate on Bernal's work that appeared effectively to be closed after the devastatingly critical *Black Athena Revisited*.⁴ With the new book, *Global Bee Flight*, I return to Africa in order to investigate the implications of the *Black Athena* thesis for our current research concerning that continent – and the implications of that research for the *Black Athena* thesis. Because Ancient Egypt occupies a key position in the debates on Africa's cultural historical relation to Europe and to the rest of the world, a large section of *Global bee flight* is occupied by an analysis of the mutual interpenetration of Ancient Egyptian and sub-Sahara-African themes, in the way of concepts and structures of thought, myths, symbolism, the kingship, state formation, and productive practices. One absolutely surprising outcome of the book (when I started out I sincerely thought I could prove the opposite to be true!) is my confirmation, without the slightest reservation, of one of the most ridiculed ideas of early twentieth century anthropological diffusionism: Egyptocentrism as a possible model for African cultural history. By the end of the fourth millennium before the common era, Ancient Egypt owed its emergence as a civilisation (contrary to what Bernal, from a more purist Afrocentrist viewpoint, thinks to be the case) to the *interaction* between

¹ Bernal 1987, 1991.

² Bernal 1987; Burkert 1992; Evangelidou 1994; James 1973; Lefkowitz 1996; Palter 1996a; Preus 1992; West 1971.

³ Van Binsbergen 1997a.

⁴ Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers 1996

Black African and Eastern Mediterranean/West Asian cultural orientations. But, in the next step, my analyses demonstrate that Ancient Egypt, in its turn, did have a decisive fertilising effect not only (as stressed in the *Black Athena* thesis) on the Eastern Mediterranean basin and hence on Europe, but also, in a most significant feedback process, on Black Africa, right into the nooks and crannies of many aspects of life, including the kingship, law, ritual and mythology. Instead of the patchwork of totally distinct 'cultures', which is the dominant view among both scholars and the modern world at large, what thus emerges is an image of Africa that displays a very remarkable cultural unity. And such unity springs, not from any timeless and somatically based Black mystique of Africanity, but from clearly detectable historical processes:

- having first served as *a* (not: *the*) major *source*, and
- subsequently as a principal *recipient* of Ancient Egyptian civilisation, meanwhile
- undergoing the unifying force of the rapid expansion of the Niger-Congo linguistic family (including the Bantu sub-family) from an epicentre between Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad as from 3,000 BCE, and finally
- as a recipient of converging Arabian/Islamic influence
- as well as – in the most recent centuries – North Atlantic colonial influences.

The general conclusion of *Global Bee Flight* is a radical, positive and (coming from what looks like a White establishment scholar) unexpected revision of our conception of the place of Africa in global cultural history. Meanwhile there is little reason why the same model of qualified continuity over large distances in space and time could not also apply to other continents, including Europe, and to the historical connections between various continents.

I have given reasons why (as an apparent reduction of difference to sameness) the argument of the convergence of African cultures (one of the tenets of the recent Afrocentrist movement, and a constant idea in Black consciousness for two centuries) is shunned by post-structuralist intercultural philosophers, but it is strange that this idea of convergence has met with so little acceptance on the part of *African* philosophers today. Instead they virtually unanimously support the argument of cultural diversity. For instance, with Mudimbe,¹ Appiah shares the position of being a leading philosopher who, while having been born in Africa, has resisted the temptation to identify with the production of a parochial form of African philosophy and instead produces a cosmopolitan, mainstream brand of thought that is eminently acceptable to most North Atlantic academic audiences, not in the least because it shuns all Afrocentrism and in general takes a reserved, deconstructivist attitude towards any African identity discourse. With reference to the work of the Senegalese natural scientist and cultural philosopher Cheikh Anta Diop, more than in respect of

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 2001a.

Bernal's work (of which incidentally he does not approve any more than he does of Diop's),¹ Appiah rejects the idea of any cultural continuity permeating the African continent today. For this he adduces not the fruits of any independent historical research of his own, or of others for that matter, but (in the best philosophical tradition of canonical botanising) two self-evidences that are absolutely untenable however in the light of recent historical research: the claim that Ancient Egypt had only a non-specialised, vaguely articulated philosophy which moreover is unrelated, in substance, with current African cultural orientations; and the claim that we cannot expect to find, in Africa, cultural continuities extending over a period of three or more millennia.² In Appiah's words:³

'If we could have traveled through Africa's many cultures in (...) [pre-colonial times] from the small groups of Bushman hunter-gatherers, with their stone-age materials, to the Hausa kingdoms, rich in worked metal – we should have felt in every place profoundly different impulses, ideas, and forms of life. To speak of an African identity in the nineteenth century – if an identity is a coalescence of mutually responsive (if sometimes conflicting) modes of conduct, habits of thought, and patterns of evaluation; in short, a coherent kind of human social psychology – would have been "to give to aery nothing a local habitation and a name."' '

Autos efá! In line with this stress on pre-colonial fragmentation lies the African philosopher's Kaphagawani's thesis on 'C⁴', which is a scientific formula (cf. C¹⁴, the carbon isotope so vital to historical dating) meant to express

'the Contemporary Confluence of Cultures on the Continent of Africa. This is a post-colonial phenomenon where different cultures meet and mingle to form new, hybrid forms'.⁴

In this formulation the emphasis on a plurality of mutually distinct and bounded cultures does give way to a recognition of greater unity, but extreme multiplicity and fragmentation is still held to be the hallmark of the African past, the point of departure. Such unity between African cultures as is being recognised is taken to be the result of the post-colonial phenomenon of globalisation (largely perceived as an extra-African phenomenon), which allows this view to salvage the concept of a pristine distinctness of a great number of pre-colonial cultures in Africa. The entire discussion on Afrocentrism (with its Senegalese precursor Cheikh Anta Diop) appears to be lost on the majority of contemporary African philosophers.⁵ Afrocentrists like Molefi Kete Asante⁶ are scarcely welcomed or cited in the circles of academic African philosophers.

¹ Cf. Appiah 1993.

² Appiah 1992:161f. For a refutation of these two points, see my *Black Athena Alive* (van Binsbergen, in press), especially the contribution by Stricker *c.s.*, in press; and van Binsbergen, forthcoming (a), (e).

³ Appiah 1992: 174; cited in approval in: Bell 1997, p. 218f, n. 29.

⁴ Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998: 209.

⁵ However, see: van Binsbergen 1996a, 1997a. For the reception of the *Black Athena* discussion among African and African American intellectuals, including Appiah and Mudimbe, cf. van Binsbergen 1997b; Berlinerblau 1999.

⁶ Asante 1990.

15.12. To intercultural philosophy as a medium

What then could be the contours of an intercultural philosophy that allows itself to be inspired by empirical research, but that essentially renews and transcends such research?

The dialogue is not only one of the oldest philosophical genres, it is also a form of communication that has established itself in the modern, and especially the postmodern, world as the most ideal form: with assumptions of equal contributions from both sides, equal initiative, equal rights, for the participants in the dialogue. One tends to assume that, from a pluralistic perspective, the dialogue offers the best possible conditions for revealing the relevant aspects of a matter, perhaps even revealing truth itself. The word 'dialogue' is often mentioned in the same breath as the word 'intercultural'.¹ In my own work, too, I have repeatedly been occupied with the dialogue as a therapeutic instrument for the illumination of personal and group problems and for the attainment of reconciliation, as a principal African social technology.² Whoever seeks dialogue is not satisfied with the mechanical, cold juxtaposition of difference; agreeing to disagree, to differ, is a sign, not of dialogue, but of the incapability of arriving at dialogue. The dynamics of dialogue always consist in making contradictions visible, then exploring the conditions under which these contradictions may be transcended in the direction of a new point of view that was not yet available from the very first but that emerges creatively from the very dialogue itself. The true dialogue is implicitly a form of reconciliation.

The anthropologist Michael Jackson (not to be confused with the once popular singer of that name) is one of the contemporary ethnographers who displays great sensitivity for problems of intercultural philosophy. His inspiration is primarily with Sartre's existentialist philosophy, and with Merleau-Ponty. With his work Jackson seeks to create a dialogue between people of various cultural orientations:

'But while my interest lies in the kind of metacultural understanding that Sartre and Merleau-Ponty sought, this should not be construed as a search for the essence of human Being but for ways of opening up dialogue between people from different cultures or traditions, ways of bringing into being modes of understanding that effectively go beyond the intellectual conventions and political ideologies that circumscribe us all'.³

However, Jackson's ethnographic interlocutors do not speak for themselves. Somewhat like a boy who out of boredom (or keenness on certain victory) plays a boardgame against himself on a rainy afternoon, Jackson himself conducts vicariously both sides of the conversation in his book. He does so in a form that is

¹ Cf. Brocker & Nau 1997; Garaudy 1977; Janz 1997; Kimmerle 1992, 1995; Odera Oruka 1990a; Tymieniecka 1984. In the background this is informed by a dialogical conception of philosophy, going back to Plato and having received a new impetus, in modern times, by Bakhtin and the writings of such great Jewish thinkers as Buber and Levinas; cf. Buber 1962; Levinas 1972, 1983; and as commentators Bernasconi 1988; Todorov 1981; Thomson 1991; Simons 1992. From more specifically cultural anthropological perspectives, cf. Abbink 1989; Dwyer 1977; Dwyer 1982; Pool 1994; Tyler 1987; Webster 1982.

² Chapter 11; also van Binsbergen 1994d, 1995a.

³ Jackson 1989: x.

not compellingly imposed either by the people under study, or by Jackson's professional habitus as an anthropologist within the North Atlantic society.

In which cultural orientation does the ethnographer in fact find herself when she makes pronouncements about the cultural orientation under study: in an African orientation, a North Atlantic one, in both, or in *neither*? One school of anthropology in which this question has been at the centre of reflection has been the Louvain School, created in the 1980s by René Devisch (one of the people to whom Jackson's major book *Paths towards a clearing: Radical empiricism and ethnographic enquiry* was dedicated). In the texts produced by the Louvain School, a characteristic figure of style has been the following. The writer leaves unspecified who in fact it is who is speaking: the ethnographer, or a characteristic member of the society she describes. Unmistakably, this practice has been inspired by a justified critique of certain hegemonic and objectifying aspects of the ethnographic relationship. In the Louvain case, moreover, this practice is usually carried out by meticulous hermeneutic ethnographic methods on the basis of a profound language mastery. Yet one cannot fail to observe that it is impossible to solve the hegemonic problematic of ethnography, by dissimulating that problematic (as the Louvain figure of style seems to do).

Therefore, and once again: in which cultural orientation do I find myself when as a *sangoma* in the Netherlands I offer a Southern African therapy system that is far from self-evident to most of my Dutch clients, but whose being offered by me is neither self-evident to most of my Southern African clients even though they clearly have no objection?

Mediating between two cultural orientations means that the mediator provides himself with an interface, a plateau, from which access to both cultural orientations may be gained, but that is yet not to be reduced to either. Intercultural communication is always transgressive, innovative, subject to bricolage. Genuine differences, that are based not on a performative act of will but on the inevitable, inescapable parallel implementation of two opposite and mutually irreducible points of departure, can only be reconciled (in dialogue, love, seduction, trade, diplomacy, therapy, ritual, ethnography, intercultural philosophy) in an innovative way that essentially takes a distance from each of these points of departure and that is not compellingly imposed by either. For this purpose a new frame of reference is conjured up, one that, on the one hand, confirms both positions (they have to be declared valid in order to make the position of the mediator acceptable), but that, on the other hand, transcends them, while making reference to a good which for both parties – but not necessarily in the same way – represents a major value. This is in a nutshell the mechanism I have sketched above (chapter 11) in my analysis of African reconciliation; it appears as if the same mechanism helps to elucidate, and to facilitate, intercultural exchanges including intercultural knowledge production – but at the cost, for a long time already recognised by modern hermeneutics,¹ of

¹ Cf. Palmer 1969; Gadamer 1965; Ricoeur 1981.

producing not a faithful representation of the original, but an innovative novel creation whose resemblance to the original may be remote.¹ We continue to be haunted by Kant's epistemology,² distinguishing the allegedly unknowable original from the known and appropriated, but inevitably distorted, mental image we have formed of the original.

I see my task as an intercultural philosopher primarily as that of a mediator, striving towards an empirically underpinned and practically applicable theory of cultural mediation. On the basis of inspiration from the empirical social sciences and of introspection based on my own extensive intercultural experiences (as documented in Parts II and III), I seek to explode the philosophical self-evidences with regard to 'culture', in so far as the latter form the point of departure for all thinking about interculturality. I seek to explode the social scientific self-evidences of theory and method by reference to the much greater accumulated experience of modern philosophers when it comes to the handling of concepts and methods of thought; evidently, for this task I shall need the constant support and criticism from my new philosophical colleagues. Interculturality presupposes a medium that cannot be relegated to any of the cultural orientations which are being mediated within it; this opens up an immense space for thought experiments and imagination. On the other hand, an empirical orientation means that we resign ourselves to impose limitations in this experimental and imaginary space, not only by explicit and intersubjective procedures, but also by a critical awareness of our epistemology, of its globally available alternatives, and of empirical facts as studied by cultural anthropology, history, linguistics etc. The challenges and potentials for intercultural philosophy are boundless, and so is its prophetic responsibility in the contemporary world.

15.13. Cultural diversity and universality

These considerations lead us to what is, next to the question of humanisation from pre-human ancestors, and the possibility of intercultural knowledge and of intercultural ethics, one of the central questions of the philosophy of culture: *Why should there be this fragmentation of cultural orientations, this multiplicity of pattern formation?* Is it proper to the human condition? To language? To sensory perception? To thought? To the handling of symbols? To a specific historical phase in the human condition, which perhaps we are at the point of leaving behind us? The latter hardly seems likely, for the predictable stopgap of every argument on cultural globalisation so far has been the emphasis on the articulation of an ever greater proliferation of separate identities each marked by token cultural differences.³ There is every indication that the philosophy of interculturality will only come of age when

¹ Cf. chapter 11: my discussion of African reconciliation.

² Kant 1983c.

³ Cf. Appadurai 1997; Brightman 1995; Featherstone 1990, 1995; Friedman 1995; Hannerz 1992b; Robertson & Lechner 1985; Robertson 1992; van Binsbergen 1994a, 1997f, 1998a.

it has developed a convincing argument explaining the tendency to fragmentation in human collective patterned arrangements.

The Ghanaian philosopher Wiredu posits¹ that ‘cultures’ must necessarily contain a universal component because without this the communication between ‘cultures’ would be impossible, and (according to him) in actuality we see everywhere around us that such communication is a fact.

Exactly the same argument is used by Sogolo against what he considers to be Winch’s extreme relativism.² In passing, Sogolo appeals to the principle of charity as formulated by Davidson. Sogolo thus applies this principle (as others tend to do)³ as the *deus ex machina* of interculturality.⁴ In Davidson’s view, consistency is an indication of truth. The *principle of charity* stipulates that we are prepared to accept as true whatever appears to someone else to be true. But underlying this technical logical usage shimmers, not by accident, the more original meaning of charity as *love for thy neighbour*, the Ancient Greek and early Christian concept of *agapē*. The intercultural implications of this view are hardly investigated by Davidson, but they amount to the kind of epistemological relativism that was formally pretended by classic cultural anthropology but that in fact – as I argue elsewhere in this chapter – has never materialised in that discipline. My argument on becoming a *sangoma*, in chapters 5 and 6, makes it clear that it is precisely the principle of charity, in the Davidsonian sense, that almost expelled me from ethnography.

Apparently Wiredu’s intuition brings him close to realising the social implications (i.e. Shen’s dilemma) of the problem that ‘cultures do not exist’ (any more). Yet Wiredu’s allegiance to the established concept of culture prevents him from offering an adequate solution, even, in fact, from formulating the question with sufficient precision. Admittedly, interculturality would be an impossibility in a situation marked by the coexistence of a number of absolutely distinct cultures side by side, each culture allegedly offering to its adherents a total ordering of their life-world. If we find this an undesirable conclusion (and as world citizens at the beginning of the third millennium CE we have no other choice but abhorring such a conclusion) then we have the following ways out:

- either we postulate (with Wiredu) a universal trait in every ‘culture’ (which would enable us to retain the established concept of culture as holistic and bounded)
- or we take a fundamentally relative view of the totality and the boundedness of culture, by postulating that every human situation always involves a variety of cultural orientations, between which there is a constant interplay, both within one

¹ Wiredu 1996, 1998.

² Sogolo 1993.

³ E.g. Procée 1991: 143; Lepore 1993.

⁴ Cf. Davidson 1984.

person with his many, varied, and other contradictory roles, and between a number of persons in their interaction with each other.

In the first case intercultural communication is the exception, in the second case it is the rule, the normal state of affairs. From my argument it is clear that I prefer the second solution by far.

But let us pause a moment to consider Wiredu's argument. What is the *evidence* that 'cultures' – or even, that the far less comprehensive cultural orientations that I would put in the place of 'cultures' – do in fact communicate with one another? How would they be implemented to do that? How can we even so much as perceive 'cultures'? A culture is a highly aggregate, abstract construct (a construct both of the participants, and of the ethnographer) that escapes direct observation precisely as far as concerns its proclaimed totality, for such totality is only presumed and is in fact illusory. All that is open to our sensory perception is the concrete behaviour of persons, and the material effects of that behaviour in the form of objects made or transformed by humans. If these humans do not share our cultural orientation to begin with, our fellow humanity enables us – if only after very substantial ethnographic and linguistic investments in terms of participant observation and language acquisition – to understand this behaviour and these objects in terms of the participants' intentionality and signification; in this way, what we observe becomes more than unpredictable, purely individual, behaviour: we are capable of discerning collective patterns that persist in more or less unaltered form over a certain period of time – the indications of cultural orientations.

Unmistakably, two regimes of pattern formation may influence each other, as anyone can see from the interference patterns that emerge when one casts two stones simultaneously into the water. But this is *fusion*, not communication; *communication presupposes a medium at both sides of which the communicating entities find themselves, in such a way that in communication their being distinct and separate is both confirmed and dissolved at the same time – we might say that they constitute themselves as different precisely in the process of communication*, of communicative union, of sameness.

We are used to thinking about 'culture' as a context of communication:¹ to the extent to which we share the same cultural orientation, we can communicate with each other. But there is a snake in the grass here: to the extent to which we share the same cultural orientation, there may not even be anything left to communicate; intracultural communication is different from intercultural communication, but it is no less problematic: both forms of communication depart from the premise of a difference that is being reduced by communication.

Regardless of the question of whether 'cultures' do or do not communicate with each other, it is an empirical fact that the bearers of explicitly different cultural orientations are capable of establishing at least a measure of communication, how-

¹ Cf. Baudrillard 1983; Fabian 1979; Leach 1976; Shadid 1993.

ever defective, between their respective cultural orientations, and these bearers produce their identities and their cultural orientations precisely in the context of that communication. *Are we then allowed to reverse the argument and to claim that it is not so much the difference between distinct cultural orientation which makes intercultural communication possible, but that it is the communication itself (the intercultural communication, formally, but now we no longer know what meaning to attribute to 'intercultural') which engenders the positions of cultural difference in the first place?* Such a view is perfectly in line with the performative and strategic use of claimed cultural difference in the context of the multicultural society. At the experiential level, it is confirmed by the professional experience of the ethnographer outside the North Atlantic multicultural society. For her professional role forces the ethnographer to a communication in the context of which, initially, she painfully experiences, and tends to reify, cultural differences vis-à-vis the local others; but gradually, as she learns and internalises the hosts' cultural orientation, it loses all exotism for her, as a result of which the initial cultural difference appears as a temporary artefact of the initial communication situation. Frederick Barth's groundbreaking work on ethnicity could be very well summarised in terms of the idea that communication (and in fact all human interaction is communicative) produces cultural difference instead of a pre-existing cultural difference engendering, secondarily, specific forms of intercultural communication.¹

Recent research has found ample evidence for the thesis that genetic and linguistic boundaries to coincide; the effect of language, and by implication of all cultural difference, is to create and sustain a specific local gene pool.² Why it is so important for human groups to have a specifically local gene pool may be explained by Hamilton's theory of inclusive fitness: altruism has survival value only within a relatively small group, and linguistic and cultural differentiation helps to keep that group small.³ And in the end it dawns upon us that these ideas refer back to what is in fact the oldest recorded theory of 'culture': it is the myth that sees in the construction of the tower of Babel (by far the greatest communicative and collective effort of humankind at that time, regardless of whether it was real or only mythical) the origin of all cultural and linguistic diversity.⁴ It is remarkable that this myth can be found all over Africa under conditions impossible to explain away by reference to the influence of the two world religions Islam and Christianity.⁵

¹ Barth 1969; Govers & Vermeulen 1997.

² Dupanloup de Ceuninck *et al.* 2000; cf. Renfrew 1991; Cavalli-Sforza 1997; Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994.

³ Cf. Dunbar 1995, 1997; Hamilton 1964.

⁴ In recent decades, the Tower of Babel has acquired a new connotation since this image was chosen as the emblem of a large international project, initiated at the Jewish University in Moscow and comprising, among others, Leiden University, to compile widely accessible and reliable etymological databases of as a stepping stone towards the reconstruction of mankind's first language.

⁵ Cf. Sasson 1980; Frobenius 1931: 169; Roberts 1973: 30f, 147f; van Binsbergen 1981a: 335; van Binsbergen 1992b: 149f, 235. Babel is mentioned once in the *Qur'an* (2: 96), but as a centre of magic, not of architecture or of ethnic or linguistic diversity.

A similar argument as that of 'cultures do not exist' may recently also be heard with regard to language.¹ Language as a distinct, integrated, bounded system would then be a mere construct (created by, for instance, lexicography, language teaching, language politics). Any idea that there would be a distinct language such as Dutch, Yoruba, Navaho or English, would then be exposed to be a regrettable, essentialistic misunderstanding. The idea is attractive in our present day and age of globalisation and the multicultural society. However, the tens of thousands of professional linguists who have spent their lives mapping out the differences and internal systematics of what they have considered to be the world's thousands of languages, have left us with an enormous body of evidence precisely in favour of separate languages as distinct, integrated, systems – perhaps not so strictly bounded at their fringes, but very clearly distinct and identifiable at their core. This evidence cannot be explained away simply with a constructivist argument to the effect that the idea of such bounded multiplicity has merely served the professional interests of linguists. Current work on linguistic macrofamilies² shows, just like current work on cultural and ethnic dynamics, considerable continuities *between* language families i.e. within macrofamilies, and even some continuity between macrofamilies. Yet we have ample reason to assume that such distinctiveness as cultures also take on, are indissolubly tied to languages and their individual specificities. Probably the one Mother Tongue of mankind, allegedly spoken some 200,000 years ago, is not a mere illusion and some of its features (e.g. primordial words for 'bottom/ground-dweller/human being', 'water', 'rain', 'speckledness/leopard', 'butterfly') are now beginning to be reconstructed with some limited degree of plausibility. Yet as soon as language comes over the horizon of such uncertain speculation and begins to be reconstructable in some detail (by the Upper Palaeolithic, no more than 30,000 years ago), what we discern is no longer primordial unity, but a linguistic diversity and fragmentation probably greater than ever afterwards in the history of mankind.

All this serves as a reminder that, although 'cultures do not exist' *any more* in our time characterised by globalisation and the multicultural society, this may largely be a recent phenomenon, whereas by far the longest period in the history of mankind has been characterised by a situation where the interplay between the boundedness of cultures and languages, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the dissolution or transcendence of these boundaries in human interaction and understanding, created the dynamics for social life, identity, and change.

But whatever the justification, à la Hamilton, of parochialism in the earlier history of mankind, the advent of nuclear weapons, and in their wake globalisation and the multicultural society in the course of the twentieth century CE, have now dramatically enlarged the scope within which altruism has a survival value. These developments have also dramatically enlarged the scope within which the opposite of altruism (entrenched xenophobia, narrowly restricting the scope of humanity with

¹ Cf. Davidson 1986.

² Cf. Dolgopolsky 1998; Shevoroshkin 1991.

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which one wishes to identify, and desiring to reduce the rest to sameness after one's own image) effectively threatens the future of the whole of mankind. In is it this context that the project of intercultural philosophy situates itself, not as a learned pastime, but as one of mankind's few remaining survival strategies.

PART VI.

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