

Virtuality as a key concept in the study of globalisation

Wim van Binsbergen

**Virtuality as a key concept
in the study of globalisation**
aspects of the symbolic transformation
of contemporary Africa

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'When children play at trains their game is connected with their knowledge of trains. It would nevertheless be possible for the children of a tribe unacquainted with trains to learn this game from others, and to play it without knowing that it was copied from anything. One might say that the game did not make the same sense to them as to us.'

L. Wittgenstein, 1972, *Philosophical investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, reprint of third edition, first published 1953, p. 97e, 282.

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1. Globalisation, boundaries, and identity

1.1. Introduction¹

Towards the end of the first international conference to be organised by the Dutch national research programme on 'Globalization and the construction of communal identities', Ulf Hannerz took the opportunity of stressing the need for further conceptual development, not just in the case of the Dutch programme but in that of globalisation studies in general. The present booklet is an attempt on my part to take up that challenge. While situated against the background of a rapidly growing social-science literature on globalisation,² my aim is not to review that literature in its impressive scope and depth; rather more modestly, and perhaps not inappropriately in the present stage of our programme, I have let myself be inspired by a series of recent discussions and presentations within the programme and within the wider intellectual framework of Dutch anthropology.

I concentrate on *virtuality*, which I have come to regard as one of the key concepts for a characterisation and understanding of the forms of globalisation in Africa. Chapters I and II are taken up defining virtuality and globalisation and provisionally indicating their theoretical relationship. The problematic heritage of a locality-obsessed anthropological tradition provides the analytical framework within which virtuality makes an inspiring topic, as argued in chapter III. The fourth chapter offers a transition from the theory to the empirical case studies, by examining the problem of meaning in the African urban environment. In the fifth chapter I evoke an ethnographic situation (urban puberty rites in Zambia today) that illustrates particular forms of virtuality as part of the globalisation process. Chapter VI applies the emerging insights in virtuality and the virtual village to René Devisch's notion of villagisation as a major process of societal transformation in Zaire's capital of Kinshasa today. Chapter VII explores the applicability of the same concepts to recent patterns of witchcraft and healing as studied, at the national level in Cameroon and Malawi, by Peter Geschiere and Matthew Schoffeleers respectively. My own earlier work on the Kazanga festival as an instance of virtuality in the rural context is summarised in chapter VIII, after which a conclusion - short as becomes a working paper - rounds off the argument.

True to the Manchester/ Rhodes-Livingstone tradition by which it was largely fed, my field-work career has oscillated between urban and rural African settings, and

I realise of course that African towns have always been a context for cosmopolitan meaning which does not stem from the villages in the rural region surrounding the town, but reflects, and is reflected in, the world at large. Yet I have decided to dwell here upon problems of meaning which – under the heading of virtuality – can only be formulated (even if their solution calls for a much broader geographical scope) when we look upon globalisation from the vantage point of the African village and its largely internal processes of signification.

Seeking to illuminate virtuality as an aspect of globalisation requires that we set the scene by taking a closer look at the latter concept.

1.2. The globalisation process

In the final analysis, globalisation is a consequence of the mathematical properties of the shape of the earth's surface. Taken at face value, globalisation is primarily a spatial metaphor: the socio-cultural implications of the mathematical properties of the earth's surface, notably the fact that from any spot on that surface any other point can be reached, while (provided the journey is continued for long enough in the same direction) the ultimate destination will be the point of departure; ultimately in other words the entire surface will be covered. Yet it is important to also investigate the temporal dimension of the globalisation metaphor: the compressing of time and of time costs³ in relation to spatial displacement, as well as the meaning and the effects of such displacement. It is the interplay between the temporal and the spatial dimension which allows us to pinpoint why globalisation has taken on a substantially new shape in the last few decades. The shape of the earth has not noticeably changed over the few million years of man's existence on earth, and therefore human culture, or cultures, could perhaps be said to have always been subject to globalising tendencies.⁴ But before the invention of the telegraph, the railroad, and the aeroplane the technology of time and space was in most parts of the world so limited that the effective social and cultural life world tended to be severely bound by geographical propinquity. Most people would thus live in a world where localising tendencies would greatly outweigh whatever globalisation took place or came along. People, ideas, and goods did travel, and often across great distances, as the archaeological and historical record demonstrates. If writing and effective imperial organisation then created a continuous and more or less stable orientation across space and time, the conditions would be set for *early* or *proto-globalisation*, characteristic of the communication technology of the

mounted courier and the sailing boat. Where no such conditions prevailed, movement inevitably meant dissociating from the social setting of origin, and establishing a new local world elsewhere – a world usually no longer connected, through effective social interaction, with the one left behind, initially strongly reminiscent of the latter but decreasingly so – even in the case of nomadic cultures whose persistence in the face of spatial mobility has depended on their comparatively low investment in spatial attachment as an organising principle.

If today we have the feeling that globalisation expresses a real and qualitative change that uniquely characterises the contemporary condition, it is because of the hegemonic nature of capitalist technology, which has brought about unprecedented levels of mastery of space and time. When messages travel at light speed across the globe using electronic media, when therefore physical displacement is hardly needed for effective communication yet such displacement can be effected within one or two days from anywhere on the globe to anywhere else, and when the technology of manufacturing and distribution has developed to such levels that the same material environment using the same objects can be created and fitted out anywhere on the globe at will – then we have reduced the fees that time and space impose on the social process, to virtually zero. Then we can speak of globalisation in the true sense.

Globalisation is not about the absence or dissolution of boundaries, but about the dramatically reduced fee imposed by time and space, and thus the opening up of new spaces and new times within new boundaries that were hitherto inconceivable. Globalisation as a condition of the social world today revolves on the interplay between unbounded world-wide flow, and the selective framing of such flow within localising contexts; such framing organises not only flow (of people, ideas and objects) and individual experience, but also the people involved in them, creating more or less enduring social categories and groups whose collective identity as supported by their members' interaction produces eddies of particularism, of social localisation, within the unbounded global flow.

1.3. Forms of self-organisation impose boundaries to the global flow and thus produce identity

1.3.1. Boundaries and identity

This raises the crucial question of how boundaries and unboundedness are at all produced and socially (and psychologically) maintained. Without proper attention to this question, I believe that our concern with globalisation will remain up in the air, and theoretically barren. Political processes, especially those of an imperial nature, have carved out geographical spaces within which a plurality of identities tend to be mapped out; this is the indispensable framework for the studies of ethnic and religious, communal identities; yet, as a social anthropologist interested in human subjects, their experiences and concrete interactions, I am particularly focused on the transactions at the grassroots level, where people situate themselves not so much in contiguous geographical spaces of political administration and military control, but in interlocking social spaces of interaction and identity. An unstructured diffuse social field cannot be named nor can it inspire identity; we need to concentrate on the situations where through conceptualisation and interaction people create a bounded space which can be defined by the actors and set apart within the generalised and in principle unbounded flow of commodities, ideas and images.

The apparently unlimited and uncontrollable supply of intercontinentally mediated images, symbols, ideas and objects which is swept across contemporary Africa by the media, commodity distribution, the educational services, cosmopolitan medicine and world religions, calls for new identities. People seek to define new boundaries so as to create or salvage their identity in the face of this constant flow. By imposing boundaries they may either appropriate for themselves a specific part of the global supply, or protect themselves in order to keep part of the global flow at a safe distance. Eddies of local particularism which come to life on either side of the massive steam of world-wide, universalising homogenisation – I think there is handy, albeit much simplified, image for you of the cultural globalisation process in Africa. Such boundaries are in part constructed by human thought: they are conceptual boundaries, collective ways of naming and classifying contemporary reality: e.g. a classification in terms of 'old-fashioned', 'retarded' versus 'new', 'modern', 'world class' of such a wide variety of cultural items as: dress styles; variation in speech behaviour; gendered, sexual and conjugal roles; conceptions of law and order; visions of cosmology and causality. However, in order to express such conceptual boundaries in the converging

social behaviour of large numbers of people, it is necessary that they are mediated, or rather constructed and ever again re-constructed, in interaction; and for such interaction generating and maintaining boundaries, the new formal organisations of Africa constitute some of the most obvious contexts. Many researchers of globalisation and related topics therefore now define their research sites no longer in terms of localised communities but of formal organisations: churches, ethnic associations, sport associations etc.

1.3.2. *An example: The religious laundering of globally mediated items*

An understanding of the way in which such organisations create identity by imposing boundaries on the initially unlimited flow that globalisation entails, can for instance be gathered from the study of such a widespread phenomenon as the laundering of globally mediated commodities and of money in the context of contemporary religious organisations. Many African Christian churches appear⁵ as a context for the managing of elements belonging to the inimical domain of commodities, consumption and the market. But we should not overlook that very much the same process is at work outside world religions yet (inevitably, since the problem presupposes the clients' extensive participation in the world economy) in a context of globalisation – among syncretistic or neo-traditional cults, which have their own forms of formal organisation. Here examples of such ritual laundering can be quoted from urban cultic practice among Surinam Creoles in the Netherlands and from an urban variety of *sangoma* mediumistic cults widespread in Southern Africa (cf. van Wetering 1988; van Binsbergen 1990).

If such organisations can selectively manage the global and construct a security screen of identity around their members, it is crucial for the development of my argument in this booklet to realise that they are at least as effective in keeping the local out of their charmed circle of identity, or allowing the global in only at severe restrictions. There is a remarkable variation in the way in which local religious forms can be voiced in a context where globally mediated religious forms are clearly dominant. Here specific individual spirits are acknowledged and confronted, so that local identities (referring to the home village, the in group, ancestors) remain part of the identity which is recognised to be ushered into the new Pentecostal environment. In Independent churches in Francistown, Botswana, a very different situation obtains (van Binsbergen 1990, 1993c):

Admittedly, there is a large number of different churches at work on the urban scene today, and although the liturgical and therapeutic style of most of them is remarkably similar, differences should not be ignored. My participant observation inevitably had to be limited to just a handful of such churches. Here at any rate ancestral spirits could only be mediated to the globally informed church environment in the most muted form possible: individual spirit were never named, but the church-goer (or in view of the fact that therapy is a prime motivation for church-going, 'patient' would be an appropriate designation) would collapse, moan and scream inarticulately, no attempt would be undertaken to name the troubling spirit and identify it in the patient's genealogy – its suppression and dispelling was the church leadership's recognised task.

An exploration of the wider social framework shows that the particular mix of global and local elements to be 'allowed in' is far from entirely decided at the level of these formal organisations alone. In Francistown, the church routine is only one example out of very many (van Binsbergen 1993a), which go to show that, as a result of the converging effects of state monitoring and the population's self-censorship and informal social control, the public production of any local cultural tradition is anathema within the urban environment of Francistown today – unless under conditions of state orchestration, such as urban customary courts or Independence celebrations. For most purposes, traditional culture has gone underground in this town. This also makes it understandable why rival therapeutic institutions available at the local urban scene: herbalists (*dingaka ya setswana*) and spirit mediums (*basangoma*) offering more secluded sessions for private conversation and therapeutic action, continue to attract a larger number of clients than the population's massive involvement in healing churches would suggest. Ethnicity does play a role here, since Francistown is in the heart of Kalanga country, and the Kalanga constitute the most vocal and privileged ethnic and linguistic minority to challenge Tswana hegemony in Botswana. Yet this cannot be the entire explanation: Kalanga is not the *lingua franca* in Francistown (that is Tswana, which is also the mother tongue not only of the distant Tswana majority to the west and the south but also of some communities near Francistown), and as from the 1960s the town has attracted such large numbers of Tswana urban migrants that Tswana are now in the majority – but also Tswana expressions of traditional culture are barred from

the public urban scene. More important, churches are about the least ethnically divided domain in Francistown society: many churches here are emphatically bilingual or trilingual in their ritual practice, and whereas it is sometimes possible to detect ethnic overtones in the conflicts which often lead churches to split, in general adherents live up to their stated conviction that ethnic bickering is not becoming in a context meant to express common humanity before the face of God (van Binsbergen 1994b).

Creating identity – ‘a place to feel at home’, to borrow Welbourn & Ogot’s apt expression first applied to Independent churches in Western Kenya,⁶ – means that the church members engage in a social process that allows them, by the management of boundaries and the positioning of people, ideas and objects within and outside these boundaries, to create a new community which in principle is independent from whatever pre-existing community attachments they may have had on the basis of their kinship affiliations, rural homes, ethnic or political affiliations. How can we understand such a home outside home? The new home made afresh on the basis of chosen attachments in a voluntary association, often in a new social and geographical environment, partly disqualifies the old home, yet reminds of it and from this reminder derives part of its meaning and emotional satisfaction. The concept of virtuality helps us to understand these important operations in the domain of identity and self-organisation.

2. Introducing virtuality

2.1. Virtuality provisionally defined

In my view virtuality is one of the major underlying themes in the context of globalisation.

The terms *virtual* and *virtuality* have a well-defined and illuminating history, which in its broad sweep of space and time, its multi-lingual aspect and its repeated changes of meaning and context, reminds us of the very globalisation process we seek to illuminate by the use of these terms. Non-existent in classical Latin (although obviously inspired by the word *virtus* there), they are late-medieval neologisms, whose invention became necessary when, partly via Arabic versions of Aristotle's works, his Greek concept of *δύναμις* ('potentiality, power, quadrate') had to be translated into Latin (Hoenen 1947: 326, n. 1; Little et al. 1978, s.v. 'virtual'). While the Scholastic/Aristotelian philosophy, with its emphasis on general potential to be realised in the concrete, gradually retreated from most domains of North Atlantic intellectual life, the terms found refuge in the expanding field of physics, where virtual velocity, virtual moment, virtual work became established concepts around 1800. This was a century after optics had formulated the theory of the 'virtual image': the objects shown in a mirror image do not really exist, but they are merely illusory representations, which we apparently observe at the end of the refracted light beams connecting the object, the surface of the mirror, and our eye. In our age of information technology the term 'virtual' has gained a new lease of life,⁷ which takes its cue from the meaning given to the term in optics.

In the globalisation perspective we frequently refer to products of the electronic industry, and the furtive, intangible projection of texts and images on electronic screens is an obvious example of virtuality. *Virtual reality* has now become a cliché of the post-modern experience: computer games and simulations which – with extreme suggestions of reality – conjure up, for the consumer, vicarious experiences in the form of illusions. As electronic media, like television and video, march on in contemporary Africa, it is also in that continent that we can make out this form of virtuality in the context of the globalisation process.

But the applicability of the concept of 'virtuality' extends further. Drawing on a notion of 'virtual discourse' which while allegedly inspired by Foucault (1966) is in fact equivalent to that of performative discourse in analytical philosophy,⁸ Jules-Rosette (1996) in a splendid recent paper reserves the notion of virtuality for a specific discursive situation: the

'symbolic revindications of modernity's broken promise' (1996: 5),

which play a central role in the construction of postcolonial identity:

'When a virtual discourse becomes a master cultural narrative [e.g. *authenticité, négritude*] , individuals must accept it in order to validate themselves as members of a collectivity' (1996: 6).

This allows her to link the specific form of postcolonial political discourse in Zaire (for a strikingly similar example from Nigeria under Babangida, cf. Apter 1996) to the macro-economic predicament of Africa today, of which the elusive magic of money then emerges as the central symbol.

Inspiring as this is, it is not necessary to limit the concept of virtuality to that of explicit, verbal discourse, and there is much to be said for a much wider application, encompassing implicit beliefs, the images on which the electronically-inspired use of the concept of virtuality would concentrate, and object. Here we may allow ourselves to be inspired by a recent paper by Rüdiger Korff (1995) even if our emphasis is to be on the cultural and symbolic rather than – as in Korff's case – on the technological and economic side:

'Globalization is accompanied by virtuality. The financial markets gained autonomy by producing the goods they trade among themselves and thereby developed into speculators' 'Monopoly'. Virtuality is well shown by the information networks in which the hardware determined the possibilities for person to person interaction. This allows an anonymity in direct interaction. All personality features are hidden, and virtual personalities take over the conversation. Even the world of commodities is virtualized. While for Marx a commodity had two aspects, use- and exchange value, today a 'symbolic' value has to be added. Traditions and cultures are created as virtual realities and states offer imaginations in their search for political subjects. This indicates

a new stage in the dialectic of disenchantment and mystification. While capitalism disenchanting morality and substituted it with the magic of commodities and technology (*Verdinglichung*), today commodity fetishism is substituted by post-modern virtual realities. (...) Appadurai (1990) mentions in a similar vein ethnoscaping, mediascaping, technoscapes, financescaping and ideoscapes. (...) As with commodities, these 'imagined worlds' and virtual realities develop their own dynamics and start to govern their creators for whom it is impossible to distinguish reality from virtuality. Just like Goethe says in the *Magician's apprentice*: 'Die Geister, die ich rief, die werd ich nicht mehr los.'⁹

Ultimately, virtuality stands for a specific relation of reference as existing between elements of human culture (A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n). This relation may be defined as follows.:

Once, in some original context C_1 , A_{virtual} referred to (i.e. derived its meaning from) A_{real} ; this relationship of reference is still implied to hold, but in actual fact A_{virtual} has come to function in a context C_2 which is so totally dissimilar to C_1 , that A_{virtual} stands on itself; and although still detectable on formal grounds to derive from A_{real} , has become effectively meaningless in the new context C_2 , unless for some new meaning which A_{virtual} may acquire in C_2 in ways totally unrelated to C_1 .

Virtuality then is about disconnectivity, broken reference, de-contextualisation, through which yet formal continuity shimmers through.

2.2. Non-locality as given, locality as an actively constructed alternative, virtuality as the failure of such construction

Applying the above abstract definition, we may speak of virtuality when, in cases involving cultural material from a distant provenance in space or time or both, signification is *not* achieved through tautological, self-contained, reference to the local; therefore, such material is not incorporated and domesticated within a local cultural

construct, and no meaningful contemporary symbolic connection can be established between these alien contents and other aspects of the local society and culture.

That geographical nearness, propinquity should be considered of main importance to any social structure was already stated by that pioneer of legal anthropology, Maine (1883: 128f). Kroeber (1938: 307f) reiterated the same point of view when reviewing the first decades of scientific anthropology. Or in Radcliffe-Brown's words (1940: xiv):

'Every human society has some sort of territorial structure. (...) This territorial structure provides the framework, not only for the political organisation (...), but for other forms of social organisation also, such as economic, for example. The system of local aggregation and segregation (...) is the basis of all social life.'

Before the development of contemporary communication technologies (which also includes such inventions, already more than a century old, as the telephone and the motorcar, and the railway which is even considerably older) the coincidence between interactive, social space and geographical space could conveniently be taken for granted for practical purposes. If horse-riding and the talking drum represent the paroxysm of technological achievement, the effective social horizon coincides with the visible horizon. It is only the invention of modern technologies which has revealed this time-honoured coincidence as accidental and not inevitable. For complex reasons which indirectly reflect the state of communication technology by the end of the nineteenth century, anthropology in its formative decades concentrated on social contexts outside the industrial North Atlantic, where such technologies was not yet available so that social space and geographical nearness continued to be two sides of the same coin.

For the geographically near to become the local in the classic anthropological sense, we need to add an appeal to the *systemic nature of local culture*. This refers to the claim (usually highly exaggerated) that its elements hang together systematically, so that it is possible to reduce the culture to a far smaller number of elements and informing principles than the astronomical number of separate cultural events that take place, and material cultural objects that exist, among the set of people involved within a fairly limited space and time. Creolisation (cf. Hannerz 1987) then means, not that the systemic nature of local culture has been abandoned by the actors or destroyed by the onslaught of outside influences, but that it only accounts for appreciably less

than the entire culture: a considerable part falls outside the system. Such creolisation can be argued to be merely a specific form of virtuality: as a departure from the systemic nature of local culture. If culture produces reality in the consciousness of the actors, then the reality produced under conditions of such departure is, to the extent to which it is virtual, only... virtual reality.

This is ground covered by Appadurai in his well-known paper on *The production of locality*. A merging of two notions of locality ('geographical space of nearness, neighbourhood' versus 'social space of identity, home') was an ingredient of earlier versions of Appadurai's argument but fortunately he has dropped that element in the final, published version, in favour of a view of locality not only as *social* space regardless of geographical contiguity, but also as problematic, as to be actively constructed in the face of the standard situation of non-locality (Appadurai 1995).

Under modern conditions of both communication technology and the social engineering of self-organisation for identity, the socially local is not any longer, necessarily, the geographically near. We need a concept of social, cultural and identity space which (especially under conditions of 'zero time-fees', i.e. electronic globalisation) is carefully distinguished from geographical space – even although even the latter is, like that other Kantian category time, far less self-evident and unchangeable than Kant, and naive contemporary consumers of secondary school physics, would tend to believe. In the same way as the Euclidean two-dimensional geometry of the flat plane can be demonstrated to be only a special case of the immense variety of n-dimensional geometries which modern mathematics has come to conceive, the insistence on geographical propinquity as a prime determinant of social relations is merely a reflection of the state of communication technology prevailing, during much of man's history, in the hunting and herding camps and the farming villages that until only a few millennia ago were the standard human condition. As such it has been built into classic anthropology. Meanwhile, the distinction between social space and geographical space does not mean that the material technologies of geographical space have become irrelevant or non-existent in the face of the social technology of locality construction – a prudent approach to globalisation has to take account of both.

As advocated by Appadurai, we have to study in detail the processes through which localisation as a social process takes place. The local, in other words, is in itself a problem, not a given, let alone a solution. We need to study the process of the appropriation of globally available objects, images and ideas in a local context, which more often than not constitutes itself in the very process of such appropriation. Let us

take our cue from the history of a major family of divination systems found throughout Africa, under conditions of 'proto-'globalisation (with the intermediate technology of seafaring, caravan trade and elite-restricted, pre-printing literacy).

This history is basically that of localisation processes involving astrological and numerological interpretational schemes as current in the medieval Arabian culture of North Africa and the Middle East, where they are known under the name of geomancy or *Âilm al-raml* ('the science of sand').¹⁰ This process produced the interpretative catalogues for all African divination systems based on a material apparatus producing 2ⁿ different configurations, such as *Fa*, *Ifá*, *Sixteen Cowries*, *Sikidy*, *Four Tablets*: illiterate African versions so elaborate and so saturated with local African imagery that they would appear to be authentically, autochthonously African. In the same way it can be demonstrated that the actual material apparatuses used in this connexion (tablets, divining boards, divining bowls), although conceived within an African iconography and carving techniques, and clad in awesome African mystery and imputed authenticity, in fact are extreme localisations of the intercontinentally mediated scientific instruments (the sand board, the wax board, the lode compass, and the square wooden simplification of the astrolabe) of Greek, Arabian, and Chinese nautical specialists and scribes. The example has considerable relevance, because here some of the main factors of globalisation and universalism (notably literate scholarship, empirical research and long-distance sea-faring), have rather ironically ended up as forms of the most entrenched, stereotypical African localisation and particularism. The hardest analytical nut to crack is to explain why, and as a result of what ideological, social, economic, and technological mechanisms, such extreme localisation seems to be more typical of sub-Saharan Africa than of other parts of the Old World in the second millennium CE. Whatever of the original, distant contexts still clings to these localised African precipitates (the overall format of the apparatus, immutable but locally un-interpretable formal details such as isolated astrological terms and iconographic representations) amounts to virtuality and probably adds much to these systems' charisma (cf. van Binsbergen 1995c, 1995b, 1996c, 1996a).

Such extreme localisation of outside influences, rendering them practically imperceptible and positioning them within the rural environment, although typical for

much of Africa's history, is however no longer the dominant form globalisation takes in Africa. Present-day virtuality manifests itself through the incomplete systemic incorporation of cultural material which is both alien and recognised by the actors to be so, and which circulates not primarily in remote villages but in cities.

Examples of this form of virtuality are to be found all over Africa today, and in fact (in a way which would render a classic, holistic anthropological analysis nonsensical) they constitute the majority of cultural expressions: from world religions to party politics mediating world-wide models of formal organisation, development and democracy;¹¹ from specialist production of contemporary art, belles lettres and philosophy inspired by cosmopolitan models, to the production – no longer self-evidently but, self-consciously, as a deliberate performance – of apparently local forms of music and dance during an ethnic festival like Kazanga in western central Zambia (van Binsbergen 1992a, 1994a); from fashionable lingerie to public bodily prudery demonstrably imposed by Christianity and Islam.

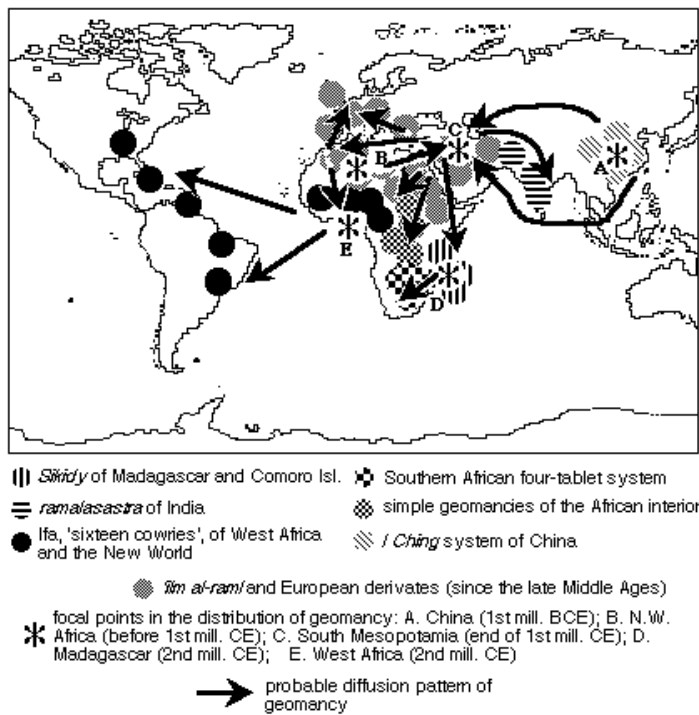


Fig. 1. The global pattern of formation and diffusion of geomantic divination systems, 1000 BCE-2000 CE.

These symbolic processes are accompanied by, in fact carried by, forms of social organisation which (through the creation of new categories and groups, the erection of conceptual and interactional boundaries around them, and the positioning of objects and symbols through which both to reinforce and to transgress these boundaries) create the socially local (in terms of identity and home) within the global. Such categories and groups are (in general) no longer spatially localised, in the sense that they do no longer create a bounded geographical space which is internally homogeneous in that it only inhabited by people belonging to the same bounded organisation ('village', 'ward', 'neighbourhood'). We have to think of such organisations (whose membership is typically *geographically* dispersed while creating a *social* focus) as: ethnic associations, churches, political parties, professional associations, etc. If they are geographically dispersed, this does not mean that their membership is distributed all over the globe. Statistically, they have a fairly limited geographical catchment area commensurate with the available transport technology, but within that catchment area, the vast majority of human inhabitants are non-members – it does therefore not constitute a contiguous social space.

Their typical, although not exclusive, abode is the town, and it is to African towns that we shall finally turn for case studies of urban puberty rites and of ethical renewal that are to add a measure of descriptive and contextual substance to the above theoretical exercises. However, virtuality presents itself in those case studies in the form of an emulation of the village as a virtual image; so let us first discuss that unfortunate obsession of classic anthropology, the village.

3. The virtual village

The classic anthropological image of 'the' African culture as holistic, self-contained, locally anchored, effectively to be subsumed under an ethnic name, was deliberately constructed so as to constitute a local universe of meaning – the opposite of virtuality. Such a culture was thought to form an integrated unity, so all its parts were supposed to refer to that same coherence, which in its entirety gave the satisfactory illusion of localised meaningfulness.

3.1. Characterising African village society

It is necessary to dwell on this point, since (as I found out when presenting an earlier version of the present argument) it is capable of producing considerable confusion. Although there are notable exceptions,¹² and although the research programme of which the present booklet is a product is prompted by the determination to change that situation, it is true to say that most of the existing literature on globalisation was not written by established ethnographers of African rural life. The typical focus for globalisation studies is the metropolis, the self-evident access to international lifestyles mediated by electronic media, with a dominant presence of the state, the culture industry, and the communication industry. However, people born in African villages are now also being globalised, and an understanding of their experiences requires an analytical and descriptive grip on African rural social formations.

Not infrequently, Marxist studies of the 1970s and '80s, including my own, are claimed to have demonstrated the deficit of earlier mainstream anthropology. This is largely a spurious claim. Modes-of-production analysis, as the main contribution of Marxism to contemporary anthropology, has done a number of essential things:

- reintroduce an emphasis on material production and appropriation;
- dissolve the assumed unitary nature of the local rural society into a handful of subsystems ('modes of production'), each with their own logic of exploitation and ideological legitimation, and linked together ('articulated') within the 'social

formation', in such a way that the reproduction of one mode depends on the exploitation of another mode; and finally,

- provide a theoretical perspective which could account for the persistence and relative autonomy (also as 'logics' of signification and legitimation) of these various modes and their articulations, even under conditions of capitalism and the colonial or post-colonial state.

This reformulation of the classic anthropological perspective therefore could accommodate internal contradictions, multiplicity of fields of symbolic reference (notably: as many fields as there were modes of production, while the articulation process itself also generated a field of symbolism in its own right (van Binsbergen 1981); but it did not discard the essentially local nature of the social formation, nor its systemic nature even if the latter was no longer conceived as unitary, holistic integration, but came to be represented as a dialectic composite of contradictions between a few specific 'logics', each informing a specific mode of production. The Marxist approach did not render the notion of local integration obsolete: to the extent to which the articulation of modes of production under the hegemony of one dominant mode has succeeded, the resulting social formation is effectively integrated by its very contradictions.

So even from a Marxist perspective it appears to be true to say that African historic societies in the present millennium have invariably displayed cleavages in terms of gender, age, class, and political power, while containing only partially integrated elements deriving from and still referring, beyond the local society, to other cultural complexes which were often remote in space and time. Yet they have offered to their members (and largely in order to accommodate those very contradictions) a fairly coherent universe, in which the human body-self, interpersonal relations, the landscape, and the supernatural all featured in one composite, comprehensive world-view, whose symbolism and ritual elaboration was to reconcile and conceal, rather than articulate, such internal contradictions as constitute the whole and render it dynamic.

In this context, the *meaning* of an element of the local society and culture (to attempt a definition of a word used too loosely in the argument so far) consists in the network of referential relations at the centre of which such element is perceived and conceptualised by the participants; through this relational network the element is taken, by the actors, and explicitly or implicitly, as belonging to that general socio-cultural order, cognitively and emotively linked to many other aspects of that order –

a condition which produces a sense of proper placement, connectivity and coherence, recognition, identity as a person and as a group, aesthetics, bodily comfort and even healing.

3.2. Yet the rural African community is problematic, or: the virtual village

In Africa, village society still forms the context in which many¹³ present-day urbanites were born, and where some will retire and die. Until recently, the dichotomy between town and village dominated Africanist anthropology. Today we have to admit that, considering the constant movement of ideas, goods and people between town and village, the dichotomy has lost much of its explanatory value. In terms of social organisation, economic and productive structures, goals and evaluations town and village have become complementary, even converging options within the social experience of Africans today; their difference has become gradual, and is no longer absolute. However, while of diminishing value in the hands of us analysts, the dichotomy between town and village remains relevant in so far as it informs African actors' conceptualisations of their life-world and social experience. Here the idealised image of the village stands for an imaginary context (no longer to be found in the real villages of today) where production and reproduction are viable and meaningful, pursued by people who – organised along the lines of age and gender divisions, and historic ('traditional') leadership – are turned into an effective community through an un-eroded kinship system, symbolism, ritual and cosmology. Vital in this set-up is that – typically through non-verbal means – ritual manages to construct the bodies of the members of the residential group as charged or inscribed with a shared meaning, a shared identity, and while the body moves across time and space this indelible mark is carried to new contexts yet remains.

Even in the village context the effective construction of community cannot be taken for granted. Central African villages, for instance, have been described (Turner 1968; van Velsen 1971; van Binsbergen 1992b) as the scene of an uneasy truce between strangers, only temporarily constructed into community – at the expense of kinship rituals which take up an enormous part of available resources and even so barely conceal or negotiate underlying contradictions among the village population. Such rituals of kinship (those attending pregnancy, birth, adolescence, marriage, and death)

not only transform biological human individuals into competent social persons with a marked identity founded in the local community (or in the case of death transform such social persons in the face of physical decomposition); such rituals thus construct, within that overall community, specific constituent identities, e.g. those of gender and age. They refer to, and to a considerable extent reproduce and perpetuate, the productive and social organisation of the village society. Perhaps the central characteristic of the old (nineteenth-century) village order was that the construction of community was still so effective that in the villagers' consciousness their actual residential group self-evidently appeared as the realisation of that ideal.

It is crucial to realise that in the twentieth century, even with reference to rural settings, we are not so much dealing with 'real' communities, but with rural folks' increasingly problematic *model* of the village community. Perhaps we could say that the village was becoming a virtual village. Rural ideological change in Africa during the twentieth century (van Binsbergen 1981) can be summed up as a process of people actively confronting the erosion of that model, its becoming irrelevant and impotent in the face of political and economic realities. Throughout the twentieth century, rural populations in Africa have struggled, through numerous forms of organisational, ideological and productive innovation combining local practices with outside borrowings, to reconstruct a new sense of community in an attempt to revitalise, complement or replace the collapsing village community in its viable nineteenth century form. In fact the entire ideological history of twentieth century Africa could be written from this perspective. Peasants have been constantly engaged in the construction of new, alternative forms of community on the basis of rather new principles as derived from political, cultic, productive and consumerist ideas introduced from the wider world. Many of these movements have sought to reformulate the notion of the viable, intact village community in new terms and with new outside inspiration and outside pressure. Ethnicity, healing cults, prophetic cults, anti-sorcery movements, varieties of imported world religions and local transformations thereof e.g. in the form of Independent churches, struggles for political independence, involvement in modern national politics including the recent wave of democratisation, involvement in a peripheral-capitalist cash economy with new symbols of status and distinction, – these have been some of the strategies by which villagers have sought (often against many odds) to create and bring to life the image of a new world, and a continued sense of meaning and community, when the old village order was felt, or said, to fall apart. And that old village order, and the ethnic cultures under which it was usually subsumed, may in itself have been largely

illusory, strategically underpinned by the ideological claims of elders, chiefs, first-generation local intellectuals, colonial administrators and missionaries, open to the cultural bricolage of invented tradition on the part of these vocal actors (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Vail 1989).

If the construction of community in the rural context has been problematic, the village yet represents one of the few models of viable community among Africans today, including urbanites. It is the only model which is part of a collective idiom pervading all sections of contemporary society. As such it features massively as a nostalgic reference in ethnic identity construction. Whatever alternative models of community are available, are shallowly rooted and reserved to specific sections of the society: Christians or Muslims (the local religious congregation as a community; and by extension the abstract world-wide collective of co-religionists), cult members (the cultic group as a community), members of a specific ethnic group (where the ethnic group is constructed into a community, but typically constructed by emphatic reference to the village model as a focal point of origin and meaning), the elite (patterns of consumerism which replace the notion of community through interaction with the notion of virtual or vicarious global community through media transmission and the display of appropriate manufactured symbols – status symbols in clothing, transport, housing etc.).

We are now ready to step into African urban life as an obvious locus of globalisation, and explore virtuality there.

4. The problem of meaning in African towns today

Globalisation theory has stressed the paradoxical phenomenon that, in the world today, the increasing unification of the globe in political, economic, cultural and communication terms does not lead to increasing uniformity but, on the contrary, goes hand in hand with a proliferation of local differences. It is as if myriad eddies of particularism (which may take the form of ethnic, linguistic and religious identities, consumerist life-styles etc.) are the inevitable accompaniment of the swelling stream of globalising universalism. Anthropologists have – in theory, that is – long ceased to define their research object primarily by reference to a more or less demarcated part of the global landscape assumed to be the habitat of a bounded, integrated ‘culture’ supposedly shared by a people, tribe or ethnic group. While the time-honoured technique of participant observation still favours their focusing on a set of people who are more or less tied together by enduring social relations and forms of organisation, such a set need no longer be localised (for modern technology – not just fax machines and E-mail, but also simple telephones and rural buses – enables people to effectively maintain relationships across great distances: as members of the same ethnic group, as employees of the same multinational corporation, as members of a cult, as traders etc.) nor do the individuals which constitute that set (as a statistical conglomerate, or a social network of dyadic ties) necessarily and as a dominant feature of their social experience construct that set as an ideal community with a name, an identity, moral codes and values. Fragmentation, heterogeneity, alienation and cultural and organisational experiment are characteristic of the global condition, not only in North Atlantic urban society but also, for much the same reasons, in the rapidly growing towns of Africa today.

In essence, the aspect of globalisation which we seek to capture by concentrating on virtuality, revolves around issues of African actors’ production and sustaining of meaning. The notion of virtuality is hoped to equip us for the situation, rather more common than village anthropology prepared us to believe, that meaning is encountered and manipulated in a context far removed, in time and space, from the concrete social context of production and reproduction where that meaning was originally worked out in a dialectical interplay of articulated modes of production; where, on the contrary, it is no longer local and systemic, but fragmented, ragged,

virtual, absurd, maybe even absent. The study of such forms of meaning is of course doubly problematic because anthropology itself is a globalising project, and one of the first in western intellectual history. African towns, with their usually recent history, heterogeneous migrant population, and full of social, political and economic structures apparently totally at variance with any village conditions in the surrounding countryside, are laboratories of meaning. What can the anthropologist, and particularly the variety of the rurally-orientated anthropologist unfashionably favoured in this booklet, learn here about virtuality?



Fig. 2. The problem of meaning in African towns: An insecure villager at Chachacha Road, Lusaka, Zambia, 1978.

To what extent has the contemporary urban environment in Africa managed to produce and nurture symbols which selectively refer to the state and the world economy, yet at the same time negotiate dilemmas of rural-derived identity and of urban-rural relations? It is here that one can begin to look for the stuff that African urbanism is made of. Is it true to say that these towns have engendered collective representations which are strikingly urban, and which offer partial and tentative yet creative solutions to such typically urban problems as incessant personnel flow, ethnic, class and religious heterogeneity, economic and political powerlessness, and the increasing irrelevance, in the urban situation, of historic, rural-derived forms of social organisation (kinship, marriage, 'traditional' politics and ritual)? Mitchell's *Kalela dance* (1956) still offers a classic paradigm, stressing how at the city boundaries elements of rural society and culture (such as a rural-based ethnic identity, a minority language, expressive forms of music and dance, specific ways to organise production and reproduction in localised kin groups) may be selectively admitted onto the urban scene, yet undergo such a dramatic transformation of form, organisation and function that their urban manifestations must be understood by reference to the urban situation alone. Or, in Gluckman's (1960: 57) famous words,

'the African townsman is a townsman'¹⁴

In other words, the African townsman is not a displaced villager or tribesman – but on the contrary 'detribalised' as soon as he leaves his village (Gluckman 1945: 12). These ideas have evidently circulated in African urban studies long before 1960.

Statements of this nature have helped to free our perception of African urbanites from traditionalist and paternalistic projections; for according to the latter they continued to be viewed as temporarily displaced villagers whose true commitment and identity continued to lie with their rural societies of origin. The stress on the urban nature of African urbanites even amounted to a radical political challenge, in a time when the colonial (and South African) economy was largely based on the over-exploitation (Meillassoux 1975; cf. van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985) of rural communities through circulatory migration of male workers conveniently defined as bachelors while in town. We can therefore forgive these authors their one-sidedness, but there is no denying that they failed to address the fundamental problems of meaning which the construction of a town-based culture in the (by and large) new cities of Africa has always posed.¹⁵

But what happens to meaning in town? It is particularly in the context of meaning that we see African towns as the arena where a migrant's specific, disconnected and fragmented rural-based heritage is confronted with a limited number of 'cosmopolitan' socio-cultural complexes, each generating its own discourse and claiming its own commitment from the people drawn into its orbit in exchange for partial solutions of their problems of meaning.

Before discussing these complexes, it is useful to realise that, as a source of meaning, the historic rural background culture of urban migrants is not necessarily as fragmented as the multiplicity of ethnic labels and linguistic practices in the town may suggest. Ethnic groups have a history (Chrétien & Prunier 1989), and while some ethnic groups can be said to be recent, colonial creations, underlying their unmistakable differences there is in many cases a common substratum of regional cultural similarities and even identities: continuities such as a patrilineal kinship system, emphasis on cattle, similarities in the marital system, the cult of the land and of the ancestors, patterns of divination and of sacrifice, shared ideas about causation including witchcraft beliefs, converging ideas about conflict resolution and morality. The result is that even urban migrants with a different ethnic, linguistic and geographical background may yet find that they possess a cultural *lingua franca* that allows them to share such historic meanings as have not been mediated through the state and capitalism. Sometimes specific routinised modes of inter-ethnic discourse (such as joking relations) explicitly mediate this joint substratum. Traditional cults and Independent Christian churches in town, which tend to be trans-ethnic, derive much of their appeal from the way in which they articulate this historic substratum and thus recapture meanings which no longer can be communicated with through migrants' direct identification with any specific historic rural culture. Moreover, partly on the basis of these rural continuities, urban migrants creatively develop a new common idiom not only for language communication, but also for the patterning of their everyday relationships, their notions of propriety and neighbourliness, the interpretation and settlement of their conflicts, and the evaluation of their statuses.

After this qualification, let us sum up the principal cosmopolitan complexes:

- *The post-colonial state*: a principal actor in the struggle for control of the urban space; a major agent of social control through its law-and-order institutions (the judiciary, police, immigration department); a major mediator of 'cosmopolitan' meaning through the bureaucratically organised services it offers in such fields as education, cosmopolitan medicine, housing, the restructuration of kinship forms

through statutory marriage etc.; a major context for the creation of new, politically instrumental meaning in the process of nation-building and elite legitimation; and through its constitutional premises the object (and often hub) of modern political organisations.

- A variety of manifestations of the *capitalist mode of production*, largely structuring the urbanites' economic participation and hence their experience of time, space, causation, personhood and social relations; involving them in relations of dependence and exploitation whose ideological expression we have learned to interpret in terms of alienation (the destruction of historic meaning); but also, in the process, leading on to modern organisational forms (e.g. trade unions) meant to counter the powerlessness generated in that process; and finally producing both the manufactured products on which mass consumption as a world-wide economic and cultural expression – in other words, as another, immensely potent form of 'cosmopolitan' meaning – depends, as well as the financial means to participate in mass consumption.
- *World religions*, which pursue organisational forms and ideological orientations rather reminiscent of the post-colonial state and the capitalist mode of production, yet tending to maintain, in time, space and ideological content, sufficient distance from either complex to have their own appeal on the urban population, offering formal socio-ritual contexts in which imported cosmopolitan symbols can be articulated and shared between urbanites, and in which – more than in the former two complexes – rural-based historic symbols can be mediated, particularly through Independent churches.
- *Cosmopolitan consumer culture*, ranging from fast food shops to hire-purchase furniture stores displaying the whole material dream of a prospective middle-class life-style, and from video outlets and record shops to the retail shops of the international ready-made garment industry, and all the other material objects by which one can encode distinctions in or around one's body and its senses, and create identity not by seclusive group-wise self-organisation but by individual communication with globally mediated manufactured symbols.

These four cosmopolitan repertoires of meaning differ considerably from the ideal-typical meaning enshrined in the rural historic universe. While historically

related, they are present on the urban African scene as mutually competitive, fragmented, optional, and more or less anomic or even – when viewed from a competitive angle – absurd. Yet together, as more or less elite expressions, they constitute a realm of symbolic discourse that, however internally contradictory, assumes dominance over the rural-orientated, local and historic repertoires of meaning of African migrants and workers.

The ways in which African urbanites, in their interactions and conceptualisations, construct, keep apart, and merge as the case may be, cosmopolitan and rural idioms, are ill understood for several reasons. Those who, as social scientists, are supposed to study these patterns of interaction are, in their personal and professional lives, themselves partisans of cosmopolitan repertoires and are likely to be identified as such by the other actors on the urban scene. Much of the actors' juggling of repertoires is evasive and combines the assumption of rigid subordination with the practice of creative challenge and tacit symbolic resistance in private spheres of urban life where few representatives of the cosmopolitan repertoires have access. And whereas anthropology has developed great expertise in the handling of meaning in one spatio-temporal context (e.g. rural African societies) whose wholeness and integration it has tended to exaggerate, the development of a sensitive approach to fragmented and incoherent multiplicity of repertoires of meaning, each assaulted and rendered more or less meaningless by the presence of the other, had to wait till the advent of Postmodernism as an attempt to revolutionarise, or to explode, anthropology.¹⁶ Our classic predecessors in African urban studies worked on the assumption that the African urban situation was very highly structured – by what they called the 'colonial-industrial complex' imposing rigid segregation and class interests, by voluntary associations, by networks.¹⁷ In the contemporary world, such structure is becoming more and more problematic, and the town, especially the African town, appears as the postmodern social space par excellence. My greatest analytical problem here is that as a social space the town lacks the coherent integrated structure which could produce, like the village, a systematic (albeit internally segmented and contradictory) repertoire of meaning ready for monographic processing; but this may not merely be one researcher's analytical problem – it appears to sum up the essence of what the urban experience in Africa today is about, in the lives of a great many urbanites.

Postmodernism is not the only, and deliberately unsystematic, analytical approach to multiplicity of meaning within a social formation consisting of fundamentally different and mutually irreducible sub-formations. As a paradigm that

preceded Postmodernism by a decade in the circulation of intellectual fashions, the notion of articulation of modes of production is in principle capable of handling such a situation.¹⁸ However, the emphasis, in this approach, on enduring structure and a specific internal logic for each constituent mode of production renders it difficult to accommodate the extreme fragmentation and contradiction of meaning typical of the urban situation. The various cosmopolitan and local historic repertoires of meaning as discussed here cannot convincingly be subsumed under the heading of a limited number of articulated modes of production. Yet while deriving inspiration from the postmodern position, my argument in the present booklet is a plea for rather greater insistence on structure, power and material conditions than would suit the convinced postmodernist.

The work of Ulf Hannerz (1980, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1992a, 1992b) is exemplary for the kind of processes of cultural production, variation and control one would stress when looking at African towns (or towns anywhere else in the modern world, for that matter) from the perspective of the modern world as a unifying, globalising whole. However, it is significant that his work, far from problematising the concept of meaning as such, takes meaning rather for granted and concentrates on the social circulation of meaning, in other words the management of meaning.¹⁹ Hannerz's position here is far from exceptional in anthropology, where we theorise much less about meaning than would be suggested by the large number of anthropological publications with 'meaning', 'significance', 'interpretation' and 'explanation' in their titles. And I am not doing much better here myself. I did offer, above, a homespun definition of ethnographic meaning, but must leave the necessary theoretical discussion for another paper, or book.

Also for Hannerz the African townsman is truly a townsman, and even the analyst seems to have entirely forgotten that 'many' (see note 13) of these urbanites, even today, have been born outside town under conditions of rural, localised meaning such as it is continued to be produced today, and that this circumstance is likely to be somehow reflected in their urban patterns of signification.

In certain urban situations rural models of interaction and co-residence tend to be more prominent than in others. We need to remind ourselves of the fact that urban does not necessarily mean global. For instance, as a fresh urban immigrant one can take refuge among former fellow-villagers, in an urban setting. The vast evidence on urban immigration in Africa suggests however that the rural-orientated refuge in a denial of globalisation tends to be partial and largely illusory, in other words towns precisely in their display of apparently rural-derived elements tend to high levels of

virtuality/ discontinuity/ transformation. Even so it remains important to look at meaning in African towns not only from a global perspective but also from the perspective of the home villages of many of the urbanites or their parents and grandparents. Our first case study deal with an urban situation, and should help us to lend empirical and comparative insight in the applicability of the virtuality concept.

With these theoretical considerations in mind, let us now turn to our four case studies, in a bid to add further empirical detail and relevance to the concept of virtuality.

5. The virtual village in town (a): Girl's puberty ceremonies in urban Zambia²⁰

5.1. Historic ('traditional') village-derived ritual in African urban settings today, and its interpretation

When central reproductive institutions of the old village order, including rituals of kinship, are already under great pressure from new and external alternatives in the rural environment, one would hardly expect them to survive in urban contexts. For in town people's life is obviously structured, economically and in terms of social organisation, in ways which would render hopelessly obsolete all symbolic and ritual reference to rural-based cults reproducing the old village order. Who would expect ancestral cults to be practiced in urban settings in modern Africa? What theory of change and continuity would predict the continued, even increasing practice of ecstatic possession ritual in urban residential areas, often in the trappings of new formally organised cults posing as Christian churches or Islamic brotherhoods, but often also without such emulation of world religions. Why do people pursue apparently rural forms when socially, politically and economically their lives as urbanites are effectively divorced from the village? The point is, however, that rural symbolic forms are prominent on the African urban scene; as such they represent a conspicuous element of virtuality, since urban life is no longer informed by the patterns of production and reproduction that corresponded with these rural symbols in the first place.

Stressing the complementarity between a local community's social, political and economic organisation and the attending religious forms, the Durkheimian heritage in the social science approach to religion, however dominant, provided no ready answers when applied to the study of historic ('traditional') urban ritual, at least in Africa.²¹ For how can there be such continuity when African urbanites stage a rural ritual in the very different urban context? What would be the referent of the symbols circulating in such ritual? The relative paucity of studies on this point stands in amazing contrast with the prevalence and ubiquity of the actual practice on the ground. It is as if the absence of an adequate interpretative framework has caused anthropologists to close their eyes for the ethnographic facts staring them in the face. At the same time they

have produced in abundance studies of forms of urban ritual in the context of world religions (especially studies on urban Independent and mainstream Christian churches), which of course do 'feel right' in an urban setting, where (far more directly than in the remote countryside) globalisation made its impact on the African continent.



Fig. 3. Menarche in an African town. Seated on a rush mat next to the woman who will be her mentrix, a Nsenga girl (middle left) who only minutes before was found to have her first menstruation, is respectfully and joyfully saluted by her mother, elder sister and a woman neighbour, while the latter's husband holds ready an axe and a pumpkin which are to be held over the girl's head in evocation of agricultural tasks she, as an urbanite, may never discharge. Chelston suburb, Lusaka, Zambia, 1978.

The relatively few researchers (including myself) who have documented urban 'traditional' ritual in modern Africa and sought to interpret it, have come up with answers which, while persuasive in the light of the analytical paradigms prevalent at the time, would now seem rather partial and unsatisfactory.

- The most classic argument is that in terms of *socialisation and the inertia of culture*: even if urbanites pursue new forms of social and economic life especially outside

their urban homes, in childhood they have been socialised into a particular rural culture which seeks continued acknowledgement in their lives, especially where the more intimate, existential dimensions are concerned; staging a rural kinship ritual in town would be held to restore or perpetuate a cultural orientation which has its focus in the distant village – by which is then meant not the intangible ideal model of community, but the actual rural residential group on the ground.

- A more sophisticated rephrasing of the preceding argument would be in terms of broad, largely implicit, long-term cultural orientations that may be subsumed under Bourdieu's term *habitus*: girl's initiation deals with the inscribing, into the body and through the body, of a socially constructed and mediated personal identity which implies, as an aspect of habitus, a total cosmology, a system of causation, an eminently self-evident way of positioning one's self in the natural and social world; in a layered conception of the human life-world, it is at the deeper, most implicit layer that such habitus situates itself, largely impervious to the strategic and ephemeral surface adaptations of individuals and groups in the conjuncture of topical social, political and economic conditions prevailing here and now.
- Then there has been the *urban mutual aid argument*: economically insecure recent urban migrants seek to create, in the ritual sphere, a basis for solidarity so that they may appeal to each other in practical crises: illness, funerals, unemployment etc.; being from home, the traditional ritual may help to engender such solidarity, but (a remarkably Durkheimian streak again, cf. Durkheim's theory of the arbitrary nature of the sacred) in fact *any* ritual might serve that function, and in fact often world religions provide adequate settings for the construction of alternative, fictive kin solidarity in town.
- The *urban-rural mutual aid argument*: A related argument derives from modes-of-production analysis, and stresses the urban migrants' continued reliance on rural relationships in the face of their urban insecurity; since rural relationships are largely reproduced through rural ritual, urbanites stage rural-derived ritual (often with rural cultic personnel coming over to town for the occasion) in order to ensure their continued benefit from rural resources: access to land, shelter, healing, historic political and ritual office.

- Having thus stressed the shared economic and ideological interest between townsmen and villagers, it is only a small step to the argument of *ethnic construction*. This revolves on the active propagation of a specific ethnic identity among urban migrants, which serves to conceptualise an urban-rural community of interests, assigns specific roles to villagers and urbanites in that context (the townsmen would often feature as ethnic brokers vis-à-vis the outside world), and effectively re-defines the old localised and homogeneous village community into a de-localised ethnic field spanning both rural and urban structures, confronting ethnic strangers and organising those of the same ethnic identity for new tasks outside the village, in confrontation with urban ethnic rivals, with the urban economy and with the central state. In this ethnic context, the urban staging of 'traditional' rural ritual would be explained as the self-evident display of ethnically distinctive symbolic production. But again, any bricolage of old and new, local and global forms of symbolic production might serve the same purpose.

These approaches have various things in common. They assume the urbanites involved in rural kinship ritual to be recent urban migrants retaining still one foot in the village. They do not make the distinction (which, I argued above, emerged as a dominant feature of South Central African symbolic transformations throughout the twentieth century) between the actual rural residential group and the ideal model of the village community, and hence cannot decide between two fundamentally different interpretations of the ritual performance in town:

- does it seek to recreate a real village and by implication to deny urbanism?
- or does it seek to create *urban* community, as (in South Central Africa, at least) new form of social locality, open to world-wide influences and pressures, merely by *reference* to an inspiring village-centred *abstract model* of community?

And finally, these approaches ignore such alternative and rival modes of creating meaning and community, precisely in a context of heterogeneity and choice which is so typical for towns wherever in the modern world. If urbanites stage rural kinship rituals in town it is not because they have no choice. They could tap any of the four complexes of cosmopolitan meaning outlined above, do as Hannerz and the many authors he cites suggest, and completely forget about rural forms. And if they do insist on selectively adhering to rural forms in the urban context, further questions can be

asked. Do they retain firm boundaries vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis the rural-centred model, or is there rather a mutual interpenetration and blending? What explains that these globalising alternatives leave ample room for what would appear to be an obsolete, rural form, the puberty rite? How do these symbolic and ideological dimensions relate to material conditions, and to power and authority: do they reflect or deny material structures of deprivation and domination; do they underpin such power as is based on privileged position in the political economy of town and state, or do they, on the contrary, empower those that otherwise would remain underprivileged; to what strategies do they give rise in the inequalities of age and gender, which are symbolically enacted in the village model of community and in the associated kinship rituals, but which also, albeit in rather different forms, structure urban social life?

5.2. Girls' initiation in the towns along the Zambian 'Line of Rail'

While the centrally-located farmer's town of Lusaka took over from the town of Livingstone in the extreme south of the country as territorial capital, a series of new towns was created in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) at the northern end of the 'Line of Rail' as from the late 1920s, in order to accommodate the massive influx of labourers in the copper mining industry. As 'the Copperbelt', this is the most highly urbanized part of the country, and the site of famous and seminal studies in urban ethnicity, politics and religion. While imposed on a rural area where ethnicity was primarily constructed in terms of the Lamba identity, the Copperbelt attracted migrants from all over South Central Africa but particularly from Northern Zambia; the Bemba identity (in itself undergoing considerable transformation and expansion in the process) became dominant in these towns, and the 'town Bemba' dialect their *lingua franca*.

If rural kinship rituals may seem out of place in town, they would seem even more so in the context of mainstream urban churches such as the Roman Catholic church. As a major agent of globalisation, this world-wide hierarchical organisation has sought to vigorously impose its particular conception of cosmology, hierarchy, sanctity and salvation (through the image of a community of believers and of saints), in short its system of meaning, on the African population, and part of its project has

been the attempted monopolisation of the social organisation of human reproduction and human life crisis ritual.

Throughout South Central Africa, female puberty ritual is one of the dominant kinship rituals (even more so than the male counterpart); its remarkably similar forms have been described in detail in many rural ethnographic contexts from Zaire to Northern Transvaal. For almost a century, female puberty ritual has been banned as pagan and sinful in Roman Catholic circles in Zambia. However, already during my research on urban churches in Zambia's capital Lusaka in the early 1970s I found women's lay groups within the formal organisation of mainstream churches to experiment with Christian alternatives to female puberty training. Therefore I was not surprised to learn that by the late 1980s, these experiments had grown into accepted practice. Nor is the phenomenon strictly confined to urban churches; for instance in the area of my main Zambian research, in Kaoma district in the western part of the country, a limited number of women now claim to have been 'matured [the standard expression for puberty initiation in Zambian English] in church' rather than in a family-controlled rural or urban kinship ritual.

The situation in the urban church congregations, as brought out by Thera Rasing's recent research (1995), is of inspiring complexity. On the one hand there is a proliferation of lay groups, each with their own uniforms and paraphernalia, formal authority structure within the overall church hierarchy, routine of meetings and prayers, and specialised topics of attention: caring for the sick, the battle against alcoholism, etc. Already in these groups the organisational form and routine, and the social embeddedness this offers to the socially uprooted members, would appear to be an attempt at the construction of social locality. The latter might be of greater interpretative relevance than the specific contents of the religious ideas and practices circulating there; the result is, to use this phrase once more, 'a place to feel at home' – but at the same time a place to engage in formal organisation. At first sight such voluntary organisational form would appear to be an aim and a source of satisfaction and meaning in itself; that is how, for instance, I looked at the Independent churches which I first studied in Lusaka in the early 1970s, when my theoretical baggage was still totally inadequate to appreciate them beyond the idea that they were contexts to learn about bureaucracy and modernity. However, I am now beginning to realise that it is such formal organisations which create the bedding, and the boundaries, within which the uncontrolled flow of goods, images and ideas as conveyed by globalisation, can be turned into identity.

Some of these lay groups particularly specialise in girl's initiation. However, contrary to what might be expected on the basis of comparative evidence from my own field research (Lusaka early 1970s, western central Zambia 1970s-90s), the lay group's symbolic and cultic repertoire for puberty initiation has incorporated far more than just a minimal selection of the rural ritual, far more than just a mere token appendage of isolated traditional elements to a predominantly Christian and foreign rite of passage. On the contrary, the woman lay leaders have used the church and their authority as a context within which to perform puberty ritual that, despite inevitable practical adaptations and frequent lapses of ritual knowledge and competence, emulates the historic, well-described Bemba kinship ritual to remarkable detail, and with open support from the church clergy.



Fig. 4. Do the rural cosmology and ritual practice constitute the principal referents of urban puberty rites? Coming-out dance of a girl (standing, left, with head scarf), escorted by her under-age second (standing, right, with bead scapular), under the encouraging eyes of her mentrix (centre, with beads in her hair), Mukunkike village, Kaoma, Zambia, 1978.

Selected analytical and theoretical questions to which this state of affairs gives rise have been outlined above by way of introduction. Meanwhile the complexity of the situation calls for extensive ethnographic research, not only on the Copperbelt but also in present-day rural communities in Northern Zambia; in addition, a thorough study must be made of the ideological position and the exercise of religious authority of the clergy involved, as mediators between a world-wide hierarchically organised world religion (which has been very articulate in the field of human reproduction and gender relations) and the ritual and organisational activities of urban Christian lay women. A secondary research question revolves around the reasons for the senior representatives of the Roman Catholic church to accept, even welcome, a ritual and symbolic repertoire which would appear to challenge the globalising universalism of this world religion, and which for close to a century has been condemned for doing just that.

The crucial interpretative problem here lies in its *virtuality*: in the fact that the Copperbelt women staging these rituals, as well as their adolescent initiands, do not in the least belong, nor consciously aspire to belong, to the ideal village world which is expounded in the ritual. These rituals belong to a realm of *virtuality*, very far removed from the Durkheimian premise (1912) of a coincidence between religious form and local group. Here we have to assess the various orders of reality, dream, ideal, fantasy and imagery that informs a modern African urban population in the construction of their life-world. For while the kinship ritual emphasises reproductive roles within marriage, agricultural and domestic productive roles for women, and their respect for authority positions within the rural kinship structure, these urban women depart very far from the model of rural womanhood upheld in the initiation, where it is formally taught through songs, through the supervising elders' pantomimes, wall pictures specifically drawn for the purpose, and especially by reference to clay models of human beings, their body parts, and man-made artefacts. Admittedly, many of these women still cherish their urban garden plots, but even if these are not raided by thieves around harvest time, their produce falls far short in feeding the owners and their families through the annual cycle. These women have hardly any effective ties any more with a distant village – and those that exist are mainly revived in the case of funerals. In their sexual and reproductive behaviour they operate largely outside the constraints stipulated by the kinship ritual and the associated formal training; as female heads of households they are often without effective and enduring ties with male partner; and not even all do subscribe to the Bemba ethnic identity.

Very clearly this urban puberty ritual is concerned with the construction of meaningful social locality out of the fragmentation of social life in the Copperbelt high-density residential areas, and beyond that with the social construction of female personhood; but why, in this urban context, is the remote and clearly inapplicable dream of the village model yet so dominant and inspiring? Is the puberty ritual a way, for the women involved, to construct themselves as ethnically Bemba? That is not the case, since the church congregations are by nature multi-ethnic and no instances of ethnic juxtaposition to other groups have been noted so far in relation to this urban puberty ritual. Is the communal identity to be constructed through the puberty ritual rather than that of a community of women? Then why hark back to a rural-based model of womanhood which, even if part of a meaningful ideal universe, no longer has any practical correspondence with the life of Copperbelt women today – women who do not till the soil, in their daily life including its sexual aspects to not observe the rules of conduct and the taboos to which they were instructed at their initiation, and who in many cases will not contract a formal marriage with their male sexual and reproductive partners. Or is the social construction of womanhood, and personhood in general, perhaps such a subtle and profound process that foreign symbols (as mediated through the Christian church) are in themselves insufficiently powerful to bring about the bodily inscription that produces identity – so that what appears as virtuality, as a lack of connectedness between the urban day-to-day practice of womanhood today and the ideological contents of the initiation, might mark merely the relative unimportance of the details of the women's day-to-day situation (including the fact that it happens to be urban), in the face of an implicit, long-term habitus?

It is time for us to proceed to our second example of virtuality, which again explores the relevance of rural-derived models in African urban contexts.

6. The virtual village in town (b): 'Villagisation' and ethical renewal in Kinshasa and Lusaka

6.1. Kinshasa, Zaire: 'The aftermath of unwhitening'

My second case study takes us to present-day Kinshasa, the turbulent capital of Zaire. In a masterly recent paper which has created much debate, my dear friend René Devisch – who has established himself internationally as one of the major anthropologists working on Zaire,²² and one of the few who still manage to do field-work there – describes in detail the rise and fall of sensualism and 'unwhitening' in post-colonial Kinshasa, including the popular orgies of material destruction in the early 1990s and their aftermath. At the end of his account he claims that a retreat towards what he calls 'villagisation' constitutes the major response among inhabitants in the mid-1990s.²³ Devisch insists on applying the cosmology of the prototypical Zairian village (which to him is in the first place a Yaka village) to the new urban orientation. For the first time, he asserts, ethics have been introduced into an urban space which in preceding decades was seen, by its inhabitants, as mere place of individual hunting without ethics, where the bars of the 1970s have been transformed into maternities and churches of today, and where thieves can no longer trespass into the suburbs which are now publicly regarded as a secluded, almost sacred space set apart for mothers and their children.

6.2. The oneiric village and urban cultural consensus

Attractive and revealing as this picture is, the suggested process of villagisation refers not to a real village but to a dream village. It seems yet another version of a process long ago recognised by students of symbolic transformations in twentieth-century Africa and extensively referred to above: the attempt to cope with ongoing social, political and economic change by formulating new blueprints for the ideal society, which invariably was to emulate the ideals of the village, in terms of kinship support, intimacy, cosmologically underpinned order, absence of sorcery. Essential in this

dream is that it only seeks to emulate, not a historical village itself, but a loose selection of traits referring to the village yet transformed so as to match a non-village environment engaged in the capitalist mode of production and consumption. Against this background the notion of villagisation, when applied to one of the largest cities in Africa, is puzzling.

When we speak of cities, in the context of contemporary Africa or otherwise, we refer to situations which in principle are not primarily closely-knit, based on a kinship idiom, face-to-face relationships etc.: relationships of the latter types unmistakably exist and make up a considerable part of the urbanites' social experience, but they are necessarily embedded in structural contexts producing the types of relationships characteristic of the mass society: relationships that are instrumental, anonymous, single-stranded, dyadic, involving non-kin, involving roles defined by formal organisations and broad social groupings such as ethnic groups and religious denominations. In addition to the demographic scale of the set of people involved and their concentration within a fairly limited area, we approach African towns with notions of fragmentation and heterogeneity, so that not the closely-knit corporate group, but the dyadic network becomes the most obvious model of urban social organisation. Plurality of cultural and class perspectives, of language, of meaning, have to be taken for granted as structural features of any urban social life. Therefore I am surprised that Devisch can discuss the socio-cultural situation in Kinshasa today in terms of a consensual convergence of the actors' interpretations and symbolism, as if we were not dealing with a complex, internally extremely fragmented and heterogeneous urban context, but with an African village as conceived by classic, colonial anthropology.

Is it Devisch himself as an analyst, who is tempted to conceptualise the most recent Kinshasa in terms of holistic, systemic locality (as a classic anthropologist looking at the rural Yaka might have been tempted to do) – or does he merely bring out, as a faithful ethnographer, the implicit notions as existing among the people he writes about? He does not make it very easy for us to answer this important question, for he chooses not to use the common tools which the social sciences have developed for the analysis of urban mass society. To the extent to which the city can never be a small-scale closely-knit social community, the tacit assumption of consensus, of a generally shared urban culture of Kinshasa, may presuppose far more locally-anchored, shared meaning in the urban situation than that situation warrants. The underlying assumption of convergence and consensus, without which it would not make sense to try and sketch 'the' contemporary culture of Kinshasa in terms of

villagisation, needs to be argued in detail. How is Devisch going to convince us that the views of the contemporary urban situation as held by, say, urban formal-sector workers, converge with those held by squatters, of workers in the informal sector, etc.? In order to identify the plane at which his aggregate contemporary urban culture and its claimed tendency towards villagisation could at all exist, we need a more explicit discussion of the field-work methods used. Now the oneiric (dream-like) view which Devisch presents as representative for Kinshasans' experience and outlook today, – as a collective dream – is so aggregate and remains so much without identified social locus (in terms of class, gender, and other prime structural characteristics of individual urbanites) within the complex urban scene, that we cannot be sure of the empirical basis of the ethnographer's construct. Whose dream or dreams are we talking about? And if it is really 'the dream' of the majority of Kinshasans today, or at least of an identifiable segment of the urban population, what method can show us that they are all dreaming the same dream, and what theoretical explanation can illuminate for us the social process which brought about such consensus?

The length and profundity of Devisch's field-work both in Kinshasa and among the rural Yaka forces us to take what he has to say very seriously. The fusion between analytical and actors' conceptualisations in ethnography is a deliberate and extremely valuable strategy of the Louvain school, meant to avoid the great danger of dehumanising objectification and conceptual imposition in ethnography (van Binsbergen 1992c). Against this background we are, however, entitled to explore the extent to which a concept like virtuality may help us to pinpoint the epistemological problems involved in Devisch's, or any other ethnographer's, analysis of the African urban situation today. How can the emerging ethical and reconstructive perspective which Devisch claims to constitute the public culture of Kinshasa today, be so total, at what level of experience and action does it manifest itself, and how much of it is actually shared, or contested, by the many different social positions that exist within the city today? The question has to be confronted, precisely because Devisch's analysis in substance is very rich and convincing. So there must be an adequate answer to my methodological questions; if there were not, that would explode the possibility of intersubjectivity (between researcher and the researched) through participant observation, as well as the possibility that, beyond or underlying the manifest heterogeneity of any urban situation, there may yet be a binding shared culture, which may largely remain implicit but is likely to emerge under crisis, such as the upheaval described.

And I suggest that part of an answer lies in the recognition that the oneiric village is the virtual village, not as a unique construct of Kinshasans today, but as a dominant image in which the problems of meaning in contemporary Africa are subsumed all across the continent.



Fig. 5. Village shelters are giving way to urban bars as foci of the male social process. A bar in the Monarch residential area, Francistown, Botswana, 1989.

6.3. Urban ethical renewal and traditional ritual initiative: Kinshasa and Lusaka compared

If Devisch's villagisation, far from being the mere holistic projections of a post-classic rural ethnographer, are an unmistakable manifestation of widespread virtuality in the African urban situation, then this prompts a comparison between Kinshasa and other major African cities. Such a comparison is likely to show that Kinshasa, despite the special and tragic post-colonial experience of Zaire, is not entirely unique, not even in the sort of ethical reconstruction which Devisch has witnessed there in recent years. Urban Zambia under Kaunda, especially in the 1960 and 1970, had very much the same emphasis on sensualism and dandyism as described by Devisch for Kinshasa; and in fact Zaire represented a dominant cultural model at the time, eagerly emulated throughout Africa. In the last few years I have had occasion to sample, during a number of short research trips, the changes which have occurred in Lusaka as compared to the time when I did extensive anthropological field-work there, in 1972-74. Here the same shift from emphatic display of sexual prowess as a sign of power and prestige, to an almost puritanical public emphasis on sexual propriety and on church affiliation. And this is not just a façade of paying lip-service to present-days norms and ideals: actual behaviour has also changed, and promiscuity as well as sexual joking are far less the norm now than they were twenty years ago.

Much like in Kinshasa as described by Devisch, in urban Zambia people do not accept any longer that the town should be a place without order, and (in the face of impotence or unwillingness on the part of the state to create order) they go out of their way to create such order themselves.

An impressive example is the situation around Kamwala bus station, Lusaka's main bus terminal. The nature of the Zambian transport system is such that (not unlike many other such places in the South) hundreds of people often have to spend the night here, or several nights, in the open, waiting for connecting transport. For decades, until recently, the bus station was a place of violence, theft, rape and general insecurity. In the early 1990s, the young men trying to squeeze out a living by showing people to their seats and carrying their luggage (monopolising the right to seats and to luggage services in the process) organised into vigilante groups, which much to the satisfaction and

with the grateful support of the public, create an authoritarian but effective order around the bus station, not only handling (in a fair and efficient way) the allocation of seats, but also giving chase to, and physically punishing (to the point of severe injury, sometimes death), all evil-doers on the station's premises, including luggage thieves, people trying to travel without a valid ticket etc. But while now their action is focused, organised and publicly sanctioned, it also carries on the tradition which has existed for decades in urban Zambia, that of 'instant justice', where especially street thieves have been known to risk their lives since every year several of them were mobbed to death in every Zambian town.

Thus the city appears as a place where order is now being created and effectuated. At the same time we have reason to suspect that the present-day killing of thieves in Kinshasa may not be a totally new phenomenon only interpretable in a context of recent notions of 'villagisation', but may have been there for decades – albeit with a slightly different meaning. Another example shows that the concept of villagisation does not very much illuminate the situation of Zambian towns today, since the order created is here is no longer really dependent on the reality of a home village out there in the distant countryside.

In our first case study we have discussed girl's puberty rites in Zambian towns. Such ceremonies, whose basic outlines were conceived in terms of local historic cultures, have constituted a feature of Zambian towns ever since these towns were created as from the beginning of the 20th century.²⁴ Until recently, their reference was explicitly to the village, where (to summarise the urban actors' views in anthropological terms) the kinship and conjugal structures and roles, the pattern of production and reproduction, the symbolism and cosmology, and the expertise about all this, were supposed to be preserved to a greater extent than in town, so that often some rural participation was an aspect of the urban rites. Current research by Thera Rasing, however, suggests that this division of labour has become reversed. Not only is there an increase in urban female puberty rites, even in the context of established churches (yet remarkably faithful to historic models without much Christian input), but the urban scene is now totally independent from rural homes, which are hardly visited anymore, and where (at least in the Northern Zambian rural areas) such rites are far less observed today. The cosmology and gender identity conveyed

through the rites are now confidently produced in town. They have become an urban phenomenon, aspects of the reconstruction of a new Zambian cultural identity which takes aboard selectively transformed historical culture, but whose locus is urban far more than rural.

Here, of course, I am relying on qualitative impressions far less systematic and collected over a much shorter period than those invoked by Devisch for his picture of Kinshasa today. In the Zambian situation I can discern two factors which help to explain the current symbolic and ethical transformation of urban life:

- the AIDS epidemic which has had a real impact on social and sexual relationships; and
- the hopes for social reconstruction though secular (including political) means, which from a mere dream in the distressful second half of the 1980s (the latter days of the Kaunda administration) became a tangible possibility with the general democratisation wave sweeping across Africa after 1989, materialising in Zambia in the 1991 general elections and the coming to power of the Chiluba administration.

I submit that a further exploration of these two factors in the Kinshasa situation would add an interesting dimension to Devisch's inspiring analysis, and would also help us to explain why the upheaval and subsequent social reconstruction occurred when they did. They would particularly bring out that, however important the image of the virtual village, other common themes and concerns play an equally important role in the converging urban and national African cultures of today – themes which by no stretch of the actors' or ethnographer's imagination can be claimed to derive from any real or virtual African village environment, and which further enhance the very virtuality of the village as an image in African globalising culture today.

This adequately prepares us for our next pair of case studies, for which we turn to Cameroon and Malawi.

7. The virtual village as nation-wide discourse: Two recent studies of witchcraft (Cameroon) and healing (Malawi)

7.1. Introduction

For my third case study, I contrast two excellent recent papers by my long-standing colleagues and friends Peter Geschiere and Matthew Schoffeleers.²⁵ Geschiere's paper offers a convincing example of virtuality in the context of globalisation, with special application to present-day African religion. Matthew Schoffeleers' paper provides the perspective from which I can focus on Geschiere's.

Geschiere's paper is only the introductory chapter of a beautiful and thoughtful book (Geschiere c.s. 1995; also cf. Geschiere 1996b), which has been widely acclaimed in its French version and whose English version, just published, will no doubt play a major role in the current revival of the study of occult forces in a context of globalisation. I have read the book in the form of a personal copy donated to me as, in the author's own words, 'le grand sorcier de l'anthropologie hollandaise',²⁶ so even if Geschiere wittily states that 'On ne se remercie pas dans le monde de la sorcellerie' (Geschiere c.s. 1995: 5), and even if there are indications that he is right, there are obvious limitations to the kind of comment I can present here. At the same time, the most appropriate way to show appreciation for a scholar's work is to critically review his work in detail. But let me stress from the outset that my focus here is not so much on Geschiere's book as such but on the way it illustrates problems of virtuality.

7.2. A recent healing movement in Malawi

Schoffeleers, on his part, deals with a recent and short-lived healing cult in Malawi, around the healer Billy Goodson Chisupe.²⁷ During a few months in 1995 – grabbing an opportunity which fell away with the aged protagonist's death – tens of thousands of people flocked to his village home in order to obtain the cure for AIDS which had

been shown to him – an ordinary villager until then – in a dream only a few months earlier.

In terms of the story of the prophet's calling, and the massive pilgrimage to his rural dwelling, the cult replays a scenario that is familiar to students of popular religion in South Central Africa in the twentieth century CE, from the prophet Mupumani who appeared in the midst of drought and effective colonial penetration in the 1910s, to the prophetess Lenshina in the 1950s and '60s (van Binsbergen 1981). In the most admirable and convincing way, Schoffeleers situates the brief contemporaneous history of the cult both within the time-honoured cosmology of the Malawi countryside of which he has become the principal living ethnographer (Schoffeleers 1979, 1992); and within the national political and social developments in Malawi during the 1980s and early '90s. Much like other religious movements in South Central Africa, Chisupe's cult is interpreted, beyond its therapeutic ineffectiveness against AIDS, as an attempt to revitalise the country.

Of course Schoffeleers realises that the central concept of *mchape* which – in deviance from the healer's own choice of words – has been imposed, by the Malawian public and the media, to denote the reddish herbal solution dispensed by the healer, while retaining its basic meaning of 'ablution', in the colonial history of Malawi and other parts of South Central Africa has acquired a more specific reference: to the young men, often returning migrants, who would come to the villages forcing people to surrender their witchcraft materials and to be cleansed.²⁸ However, in the context of Chisupe's cult, references to witchcraft have been so minimal that Schoffeleers sees no reason to refer to them.

7.3. The status of 'witchcraft' as an analytical term

Before I proceed, a few words are in order about the term 'witchcraft'. I dislike the term and prefer to use 'sorcery' instead, but like Geschiere I do not think that we should waste time over terminological issues before we have considered the actual language usages of the people we write about. In his recent work, as well as in his earlier book on the Maka of Cameroon, Geschiere proposes to use a term which he suggests to be more neutral, 'occult forces' (Geschiere 1982).

Employing standard anthropological instruments such as cultural relativism and the distinction between emic (actors') and etic (analytical) models, we may be tempted

to distinguish at least four different contexts where terms designating such 'occult forces' are coined:

- the village and the local language prevailing there,
- the popular culture of the town with its oscillation between local African languages, and an international language,
- the national elite and its preferred international language, or
- the domain of international scholarship.

Geschiere's argument now claims – and that is an important aspect of its unique quality – that these four contexts are intimately interrelated and even overlapping in the case of contemporary Cameroonian beliefs and practices relating to witchcraft. At this point in my argument this may justify us to employ the term 'witchcraft', if only as a blanket descriptive term.

In Geschiere's argument witchcraft is the central issue, and he clearly and convincingly sees no option but to confirm the image well-known from the literature written by missionaries and colonial administrators of a much earlier vintage:²⁹ an Africa which is truly the abode of witchcraft. But, contrary to the expectations of these early European observers and actors on the African scene, he proceeds to demonstrate that witchcraft has not disappeared under the onslaught of modernity, but has installed itself within the very heart of modernity: it is the dominant discourse concerning power in the post-colonial state, and concerning the acquisition and use of modern consumer goods.

7.4. The absence of witchcraft in Chisupe's movement

In Schoffeleers' argument, by contrast, the witchcraft element is absent,³⁰ and I am inclined to think that this is a valid rendering of the actual situation. Not so much because Schoffeleers is the Malawi specialist (his data in this case are not of standard quality, deriving from newspaper clippings, personal correspondence and unedited video recordings taken by an anthropological colleague, – he has not even been on the spot), not even because of corroborating evidence from Probst, van Dijk and other local ethnographers, but because the extensive research on religious transformations in South Central Africa in the course of the last few centuries – the massive research

output over the past three decades, which has owed so much to Terence Ranger³¹ — certainly has revealed the existence of a limited number of options besides witchcraft.



Fig. 6. Although the global economy is omnipresent (notice the enamel basin, petrol drums, plastic bucket, manufactured textiles, next to locally grown calabash containers), viable agricultural production, of which various produce is shown in the picture, provided relevance to the ancient rural cosmology. Nkeyema, Kaoma, Zambia, 1978.

Witchcraft was the main issue in some religious expressions which, having become fashionable, swept as cults across the region — but not in all. Ironically, witchcraft eradication movements do not constitute the crucial limiting case their name would suggest, for the active confrontation of the witchcraft in others presupposes, not a interpretative alternative, but a firm belief in witchcraft as the central explanatory factor in evil. The prophetic idiom represented by Mupumani

addressed an ecological or productive concern, for rain and vegetation. Cults of affliction, which have formed the major religious expression in western central Zambia during much of the twentieth century, represented the African actors' radical departure from the theory of witchcraft as an explanation of evil: not human malice, but capricious non-human alien spirits were cited as the cause of illness and distress, and these spirits were reputed to emulate the spatial displacement, to travel the very roads, of regional population movements, long-distance trade, labour migration, colonial penetration and mass consumption of foreign-produced manufactured goods. Christian churches, to cite another major alternative to witchcraft as a religious idiom, has operated a theory of evil which not so much accepts witchcraft as a mode of explanation, but offers an alternative explanation in terms of sin and salvation, and by doing so provides a shelter for many of those fearing the witchcraft of others as well as the witchcraft inside themselves. All this does not mean that the people practising cults of affliction or Christianity entirely ceased believing in witchcraft or engaging in witchcraft practices – but at least they had access to a religious variant where witchcraft was not the all-overriding mode of explanation (van Binsbergen 1981).

7.5. The construction of a discursive context for analysis: (a) the village as the dominant locus of cosmological reference

A crucial difference between the arguments of Geschiere and Schoffeleers lies in the way in which each constructs a discursive context for his analysis.

For Schoffeleers this is a *regionally embedded context*: without saying so explicitly, the argument moves back and forth between on the one hand, post-colonial Malawi, whose socio-cultural and political outlines we need to know in order to understand the story - and on the other hand some generalised malawian village environment, which constitutes the setting for cosmological notions about trees and their healing power, and for the typical biography (including temporary death, a visit to the underworld or heaven, and rebirth on earth) of the prophet and the healer (van Binsbergen 1981: 195, 239), – in other words, the village is the very place where ancestors dressed in bark-cloth may yet appear in dreams. Meaning is implied at the level of the actors, and interpretation is rendered possible at the level of the academic writer and reader, by Schoffeleers' dextrous juggling between these two regionally nested sets of references. Much of the argument is by imputation: the two spheres are

suggested, in some unarticulated way whose implications for method and interpretation remain un-argued, to be distinct yet continuous and interconnected, so that meanings and conditions applying to one sphere can be carried over to the other. Is not the crux of the healers' oneiric message that there is a cure for every ailment? Schoffeleers data may not be in the classic anthropological tradition of participant observation, but his argument, as well as his empirical method, is certainly in the line of inspired socio-religious African history for which Terence Ranger set the examples. In fact, no piece by Schoffeleers has reminded me more strongly of the best work by Ranger – for instance the latter's masterly short study of the witch-finder Tomo Nyirenda, also known as Mwana Lesa, a piece which, when I read it in draft in 1972, made a more profound impression on me than almost any contemporary scholarly text, provided me with a splendid model to emulate, and committed me overnight to the study of Central African religious history (Ranger 1975a).

7.6. The construction of a discursive context for analysis: (b) leaving the village and its cosmology behind, and opting for a globalising perspective

Geschiere as an author can be seen to struggle with the same problem as Schoffeleers does: *where can we find a locus of meaning and reference, for the African actors, as well as for the academic discourse about their witchcraft beliefs and practices?*

Both our authors derive their inspiration and their analytical confidence, rightly, from their years of participant observation at the village level. But for Geschiere the village and its cosmology is no longer a dominant reference.

Which village, and which region, anyway? Geographically, some of the data which he presents as having triggered his analytical curiosity may derive from a Cameroonian village, but on closer inspection his corpus highlights the discourse and practices among African elites and middle-classes, and between anthropologists and selected individual Africans who, as employed anthropological assistants, may be characterised – with some stretch of the imagination – as practical or temporary members of the middle class. I deliberately use the word corpus, whose textual and finite nature, with its sense of procedural appropriation rather than humble and defenceless immersion, differs so very much from the standard anthropological material based on participant observation over a prolonged period. The last thing I

want to do here is criticising Geschiere for methodological procedures which, far from being defective, constitute deliberate and strategic choices on his part. Having done his bit on occult forces at the village level, in his Maka book and a number of shorter pieces, he emphatically and justifiably seeks to move away from the village setting – which anthropologists may be tempted to construct as being unique – among the Maka. He wishes to explore how witchcraft operates in a context of ‘modernity’: the state, the district capital, the city, modern consumption, elite behaviour.

These choices are strategic and commendable, not only in view of the time pressures an anthropological field-worker experiences if, like Geschiere, he is at the same time a successful leading academic in his distant home country – but also in view of the already vast literature on witchcraft in a great number of African village settings.

All the same these choices direct the research, however timely it may be, to contexts both geographically dispersed and endowed with such social power that they can effectively impede participant observation by an anthropologist. This would be so for any topic, but all the more so for the topic of witchcraft, where sinister threats and counter threats, and occasional confrontations with the very real powers of witchcraft specialists to harm and kill people, create a field-work setting well comparable to that of a front-line position in guerrilla warfare.

The latter is no facile rhetoric. Having from 1972 frequented a village environment in Kaoma district, western central Zambia, where witchcraft was and has been the dominant discourse for discussing interpersonal relations, both within the family and at the local royal court, I became interested, in the early 1990s, in studying the activities of the witch-finder Tetangimbo. He was reputed to be active around Mangango, a thriving rural centre at the other end of the district, at some 120 km distance. The case has interesting parallels with that of Mwana Lesa referred to above (cf. Ranger 1975a; Fetter 1971). Surrounded by a considerable number of locally recruited assistants, drawing his clientele from all over Kaoma district, and relying not on the traditional alkaloid bark poison (*mwathe*, *mwave*) but on absolutely lethal manufactured agricultural poison which left the accused no chance whatsoever of escaping with his life, the witch-finder is alleged to have killed a considerable number of people in the latter days of the Kaunda administration and right up to 1992. A criminal investigation was subsequently initiated, but the accused fled to Namibia, the case was never brought to trial, the police records are nowhere to

be traced, and some key witnesses are reputed to have been killed. Noticing that my own scholarly interest in the case was interpreted by some of the administrators and by the population at the district capital as an attempt to establish myself as Tetangimbo's successor (!), in a context where local actors had difficulty distinguishing between my Botswana-derived spirit mediumship and the more sinister forms of occult practice as common in western central Zambia, I realised (and was explicitly warned) that further insistence would be inviting violence of either an occult or a physical nature; and I have effectively given up the project. One of the lessons I have learned in the process is this: to appreciate the amazing difference between

- the relatively open discourse on witchcraft and on specialist occult powers in the village environment, where even the most terrible suspicions cannot take away – in fact, presuppose – the fact that everyone is personally acquainted and engages in public sociability, as against
- the anonymous, fragmented, veiled and basically secret discourse on witchcraft in even a small urban centre like a Zambian district capital.³²



Fig. 7. In town, witchcraft fears tend to focus on urban concerns such as the acquisition, and subsequent protection, of a modern house and a car. Somerset East Extension, a brand-new site-and-service housing estate in Francistown, Botswana, 1988.

It is not only the choice for a national or even international level of variety and comparison, impossible to cover by any one investigator's participant observation, that gives the specific flavour of displacement, of operating in an uncharted no man's land, to Geschiere's discourse on witchcraft in modern Africa. Having studied the village and written his monograph, he is now operating at a level where the meaning which actors' attribute to their witchcraft practices is no longer informed by the cosmology of some original village environment. Or is it? When we compare Geschiere's approach to that of Schoffeleers, the difference may be tentatively expressed thus:

- Schoffeleers has access to the village cosmology and appeals to it to partially explain the meaning of contemporary events at the national level, even if he does not argue in detail the interrelations between town and country and the interpenetration of rival cosmologies in Malawi today;
- Geschiere on the other hand ignores the village cosmology and therefore, despite the close attention – throughout his published work – for the interpenetration between the village and the wider national political and economic scene particularly in contemporary Cameroon, is at a loss to identify (or rather, is no longer interested in identifying) the locus where witchcraft beliefs and practices take shape and meaning; his approach to witchcraft is essentially de-contextualised.

From a classic anthropological point of view, such a characterisation of Geschiere's work would amount to severe criticism. Yet it is this particular orientation of his work on witchcraft which allows him to capture an important aspect of contemporary African life: the extent to which the village is no longer the norm, no longer a coherent and consistent point of reference and meaning. In other words, Geschiere's approach may be de-contextualised, only to the extent to which also the actors' conceptualisation is de-contextualised.

But before I elaborate this point, let us explore what could have been gained, in the Cameroonian case, from a closer attention to the rural cosmology of witchcraft.

7.7. The possible lessons from a rural-orientated cosmological perspective on witchcraft

Might not some greater explicit attention for rural-based cosmology, and for the relevant literature in so far as it illuminates the cosmological position of witchcraft,

have helped solve a number of dilemmas which now remain in Geschiere's argument? The answer is a qualified yes, yet we shall see that the great value of Geschiere's argument lies in the fact that yet he dared steer away from the village.

Much of that literature is cited by Geschiere (Geschiere c.s. 1995); but, like we all do as authors, he interprets it in a personal way. Thus, I find it hard to understand Geschiere's claim that this older anthropological discourse on witchcraft is so very moralistic in the sense that it can only present witchcraft as something bad, and does not realise that in the African experience it is ambivalent, also capable of inspiring excitement, admiration, a positive sense of power; in fact, the realisation that his African companions could be positively fascinated by witchcraft is presented as a serendipity.



Fig. 8. Operating under the smoke of Francistown's magnificent new Nyangabgwe hospital, an urban diviner, in what is locally known as 'his surgery', casts his divination tablets (ultimately derived from Arabian and Chinese geomancy, but entrenched in African localisation since c. 1500 CE) in order to diagnose a case of suspected witchcraft. Somerset East residential area, Francistown, Botswana, 1989.

In my opinion Geschiere falls victim here to his tendency to overlook the place of witchcraft in African rural cosmologies. Whatever the difference between acephalous societies and those with centralised political leadership, and whatever the variations across the continent, African cosmologies tend to converge on this point, that they have important moral implications, defining witchcraft as transgressing the moral boundaries defined in those cosmologies. As a statement about the land, which in many parts of Africa is the ultimate economic as well as ontological and moral reality, these cosmologies tend to stipulate a morality which makes the absence of murder, incest and witchcraft a precondition for the fertility of the land.³³

This does not mean that these moral boundaries can never be transgressed; on such transgression in fact depends the construction and legitimation of forms of identity which go beyond the scope of the ordinary human being inhabiting the standard village: the identities of ruler, diviner-priest, monopolistic trader, blacksmith, bard. The morality implied in witchcraft beliefs therefore particularly informs, and is informed by, the dynamics of face-to-face interaction within commoner villages as standard contexts of production and reproduction, and tends to be suspended or challenged in the context of other modes of production including royal courts (cf. van Binsbergen 1992b, 1993d).

Geschiere's central point about the moral ambiguity implied in African witchcraft is very well taken, and I could not agree more when he claims that it is this ambiguity which allows witchcraft to insert itself at the heart of African modernity. Such ambiguity however, contrary to what he claims, does not at all explode the moral overtones which the concept carries, in the view of many Africans and of many well-informed anthropologists. Nor can it entirely be relegated to some universal, innate quality of the sacred to be both benevolent and destructive, as stressed by Durkheim (1912) and Otto (1917). That ambiguity largely reflects the material contradictions between the various modes of production involved in African rural social formations, and the ideological and symbolic expressions of those contradictions. Nor is this a feature particular to Africa, as an analysis, along similar theoretical lines, of witchcraft and other forms of magic in the Ancient Near East may show (van Binsbergen & Wiggermann, in press). Because modes of production ultimately revolve on the appropriation of nature, we can understand why the fundamental distinction, in so many African cosmologies, between the ordered human space ('village') and the forces of the wild ('forest', 'bush'), particularly empowers roles situated at the boundary between these domains: the hunter, the musician, the healer, the blacksmith.

Meanwhile, the amazing point is not so much variation across the vast African continent, but convergence. The 'new' idiom of witchcraft which Geschiere describes for Cameroon, in terms of victims being in some occult way captured and made to work as zombies, I also encountered during field-work in both Zambia and Guinea-Bissau (but so far not in urban Botswana). The South-east Cameroonian *jambe* as a personalised occult force demanding sacrifices of close kin (the 'old' witchcraft idiom) would appear to be equivalent – in belief, practice and even etymology – to the Zambian concept of the *chilombe* or *mulombe*, a snake with a human head which is secretly bred near the river, first on a diet of eggs and chicks, later demanding that his human counterpart nominates close kin for sacrifice in exchange for unrivalled powers and success (Cf. Melland 1967; van Binsbergen 1984). What however seems to be absent from the Cameroonian scene is the concept as enshrined in the widespread Bantu root *-rozi*, *-lothi*, *-loi*, with connotations of moral transgression, malice, murder, incest, not exclusively through the use of familiar spirits but also, or especially, relying on *materia magica*: herbs, roots, parts of human or animal bodies. Extremely widespread³⁴ is the belief (fully understandable on the basis of the cosmological principle cited) that for any type of excessive, transgressive success – attaining and maintaining the status of ruler, diviner-priest or monopolist trader – a close kinsman has to be sacrificed or to be nominated as victim of the occult forces.

7.8. The felicitous addressing of virtuality

These are the sort of insights one can pick up at the village level – as Geschiere himself has done in his earlier work. Perhaps he should have tried harder to bring these insights to bear on his supra-local, non-rural argument. But his insistence to explore Cameroonian social and political life beyond the village enables Geschiere in the end to do something truly unique and impressive. He refuses to make his discourse on witchcraft ultimately dependent upon some local village scene. Rather, he describes witchcraft as part of today's national culture of Cameroon, much in the way as one might describe, for instance, qualified sexual permissiveness as part of the national culture of The Netherlands today. He realises that the village context may once have engendered or incubated the witchcraft beliefs and practices which today have such an impact on middle-class and elite life in Cameroon and throughout Africa, but he seems convinced that today such a rural reference is no longer a determining factor for the actors. We are left with a situation which may not at all satisfy the

theoretical assumptions of the anthropologist who only feels truly at home in the African village context, but which for those who know African urban life today is utterly convincing: witchcraft beliefs which are suspended in the air, which are not endowed with meaning by their reference to some actual, concrete practice of production and reproduction within the horizon of social experience of the actors carrying such beliefs, but whose conceptual and social basis is fragmented and eroded, a loose bricolage of broken myths and ill-understood rumours about power and transgression, fed on one side by the faint echoes of a rural discourse and practice, but on the other by the selective recycling of detached, de-contextualised images of African life, including witchcraft, as produced by Europeans (anthropologist, missionaries, colonial civil servants) as well as by African elite and middle-class actors, augmented by fragments derived from an (equally de-contextualised) global repertoire of occult images and concepts, and subsequently recycled even wider in present-day African national societies.

In this way, Geschiere beautifully captures the *virtuality* which is such an essential aspect of the modern African condition. The beliefs and practices clearly have the formal characteristics that one would associate with the equivalent, in African cultural production, of the virtual reality of electronic media and games. They lack tangibility, precision and detail, and neither reveal, nor claim, profound cultural competence. Despite an element of regional variation (which Geschiere lists, beside the kinship link and the ambiguity, among the three major features of witchcraft beliefs in Cameroon today, and of which he shows the potential for ethnic articulation) these beliefs and practices tend to blend into broad blanket concepts, situating themselves in some sort of national or international *lingua franca* of concepts, ideas and rumours which (also because of the effect of the recycling of North Atlantic reformulations) can hardly be traced back to any specific regional or ethnic rural source of conceptualisation and meaning. Most significantly, Geschiere tells us that actors (for reasons which he does not go into, but which revolve on the virtuality which I have pinpointed) often prefer to discuss witchcraft matters not in any of the Cameroonian languages but in French or English!

7.9. Virtuality and time

Recent media research (Sandbothe & Zimmerli 1994) has stressed the fact that contemporary forms of art and the consumption of images derive their impact

particularly from a transformation of the temporal basic structure of human perception. In the creation of virtuality, time plays a key role, as I began to realise as soon as I stumbled into the massive field of the social science and the philosophy of time.³⁵ Witchcraft beliefs and practices in contemporary Africa provide an example of this time dimension of virtuality. Geschiere's discussion carries the strong suggestion that these beliefs are situated in some sort of detached no-man's-land, and do no longer directly refer to the village – they are no longer rooted in the productive and reproductive processes there, nor in the attending cosmology. Part of that cosmology, fragmented, disintegrated, ill-understood, and exposed to vaguely similar globalising influences from elsewhere, has been exported to function, more or less, outside the village. Middle classes and elite use English or French to discuss its blurred and collapsed notions.

But if that transformed, virtualised cosmology still retains its social and symbolic potency (and that it does so is very clear from Geschiere's argument), is that not because, among other factors, it does contain an oblique reference to the village and its intact moral cosmology, in which the witch has for centuries, probably millennia, occupied a central place? If this is correct, then in a way the village is still part of witchcraft beliefs and practices in Africa, even if these are situated among the elite and at state courts of law, usually at considerable spatial and social distance from villages. Yet the fundamental manipulation here is not in terms of space, but of time: as if the primordial time of the village (of the self-evident competence of the way of life it represented, of its cosmology which could defeat the witches or at least keep them at bay) had somehow – as in a daydream momentarily flashing by – been restored. It is the same play at temporal virtuality which for instance empowers the South African Zulu-based Inkatha violence through dreams of a acutely reviving past, in which otherwise totally obsolete principles of a heroic regimental order flash back to life.

Geschiere's argument also shows signs of such a play with virtual time. For if the 'new' forms of witchcraft in the 1980s-90s use the idiom of the slave trade which has been extinct for almost a century, then this is an anachronism – even if the slave trade belongs to a more recent history than e.g. the establishment of ancestral cults. In other words, the reference to earlier forms of globalisation (slave trade) is now used in order to express and contest, in a witchcraft idiom, newer forms of globalisation, such as the differential access to consumer goods and post-colonial state power. This is comparable to the processes of selective borrowing between time frames which I tried to capture in my analysis of South Central African cults of affliction, which I also

interpreted as referring to a period of long-distance trade, i.e. the nineteenth century (van Binsbergen 1981: 155f, 162f; 1992b: 262f.).

I must leave it for some other occasion to discuss the details of the interconnections and variations which Geschiere discovered on this intermediate, virtual plane, which for us village-trained anthropologists is so difficult to conceptualise and which is yet the scene at which much of the symbolic life of African today take place. My aim here has not been to do full justice to his book, but to show how it is an excellent example of virtuality and its analytical potential.

7.10. Conclusion: The rural-orientated perspective on witchcraft and healing as an anthropological trap?

Finally, we should not miss the opportunity of going full circle and assess what these achievements on Geschiere's part mean in terms of a possible re-assessment of Schoffeleers' picture of the Chisupe movement.

Schoffeleers helped us to pinpoint what could have been learned from a rural-inspired reading of the spatially distant, Cameroonian data, while taking for granted that such a rural perspective was eminently applicable to the Malawian healing movement's discourse. But were the Malawian actors involved really prepared for such a reading, and did they have the symbolic baggage to make such a reading at all relevant to their situation? Does Schoffeleers' reliance on such rural insight as prolonged participant observation at the village level accords one, yield insight in present-day Malawian actors' conscious interpretations of the problem of evil as expressed in Chisupe's mass movement? Or does it merely reveal the historical antecedents of such interpretations – a background which has gone lost to the actors themselves? Does the analytical return to the village – and I myself have made my own instinctive enthusiasm for such a reading abundantly clear in the preceding pages – amount to valid and standard anthropological hermeneutics, or is it merely a form of spurious *anthropologising* which denies present-day Malawians the right to the same detachment from historic, particularistic, rural roots, the same de-contextualisation, which many North Atlantic Africanists very much take for granted in their own personal lives? It is this very detachment, this lack of connectivity – a break in the chain of semantic and symbolic concatenation –, which the concept of virtuality seeks to capture.

On this point the recent work of Rijk van Dijk (1992) is relevant, and revealing. In the Ph.D. thesis which he wrote under supervision of Matthew Schoffeleers and Bonno Thoden van Velzen, the assertive puritanism of young preachers in urban Malawi is set against the background of the preceding century of religious change in South Central Africa and of the interpretations of these processes as advanced in the 1970s and 1980s. Here the urban discourse on witchcraft already appears as 'virtual' (although that word is not yet used), in the sense that the urbanites' use of the concept is seen as detached from direct references to the rural cosmology and rural conceptualisations of interpersonal power. Similarly, the events around Chisupe may be interpreted not as an application or partial revival of time-honoured rural cosmological notions, but as an aspect of what van Dijk describes as the emphatic moral re-orientation in which Malawi, under the instigation of the new president Mr Muluzi, was involved at the national level, at the eve of the 1994 elections, and in the face of the AIDS epidemic (van Dijk, in press).

8. The virtual village in the village: A rural ethnic festival in western central Zambia

8.1. Introducing the Kazanga festival

My fourth case study takes us back to Zambia. It concerns an ethnic association in modern Zambia, and its annual festival. It shows us that even today's rural environment is affected by globalisation in such a way that the concept of virtuality helps us to make sense of the situation.³⁶

In western Zambia a large number of ethnic identities circulate, among which that of the Lozi (Barotse) 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, 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 in the Lozi aristocracy, have constituted the 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:³⁷ *the quest for political and economic articulation with the national centre*, by-passing the Lozi whose dominance at the district and provincial level dwindled only slowly. In this articulation process the chiefs, with their lack of 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 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 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 complete overview of Nkoya songs, dances and staged rituals. Of course what we have here is a form of bricolage and of invention of tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983): for it would have been impossible to completely revive the nineteenth-century Kazanga harvest festival, which comprised only one royal, but also human sacrifices. The details of the contemporary Kazanga festival I have treated at length elsewhere, and I shall here mainly focus on the virtuality theme.



Fig. 9. A historic puberty rite in the throes of virtuality: the choir leader encouraging a recently initiated girl to publicly re-enact her coming-out dance, Kazanga festival, Kaoma, Zambia, 1994; as further aspects of virtuality, notice the girl's and choir-leader's identical wrappers, and the smartly dressed notable capturing the event with his camera.

8.2. Virtuality in Kazanga³⁸

8.2.1. Production of identity in Kazanga

The Kazanga festival revolves around the mediation of the local Nkoya identity towards the national, and by implication world-wide space, — a mediation which is to transmute the local symbolic production (one has hardly any other 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 totally transformed towards a performative format, orchestrated, directed, rehearsed, subjected to the streamlining 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 cultural production, and intercontinental pop media culture.



Fig. 10. The articulation of the global and the local in the Kazanga festival. Smartly dressed national-level and regional politicians rush to donate money at the directions of the traditionally attired choir leader; Kazanga festival, Kaoma, Zambia, 1994.

The Nkoya identity which is thus put on display, is not only recent and situational, but also 'virtual', in the sense that it does not at all coincide any more with what the participating and performing villagers do experience as the self-evident ordering (in terms of space, time and social relations) of village life, in whose context superficially similar (but on closer scrutiny fundamentally different) truly historic forms of symbolic production are engaged which might be more properly termed 'Nkoya traditional culture'. The cultural production during the *Kazanga* festival is somehow suspended in the air, it is intangible, no longer anchored in the social and symbolic particularisms of concrete social groups nor available for effective appropriation by such groups. Yet (or perhaps precisely because these features) it is passionately acclaimed among the very representatives of such particularisms.



Fig. 11. Virtuality reigns at the Kazanga festival. A clerk of the district branch of the Department of Cultural Services, dressed up in the historic attire of the court jester (kayoni ka Mwene, the king's bird), reminds uniformly dressed village girls to position themselves in a regular grid and to keep in line. In the back a poorly dressed chief's court official wields a tape recorder of ghetto blaster size, so as to record the dance troupe's song. Kazanga festival, Kaoma, 1994.

8.2.2. Commoditification and virtuality

Cultural presentation in the context of the Kazanga festival is a form of commoditification. 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 which is represented by these dignitaries. There is also more tangible ready cash involved: the performers are paid a little for their services. Moreover the performances take place in a context which is increasingly dominated by characteristic commodities from the global consumerist culture of reference: the performances are supported – and this is absolutely unheard of in the villages – by public address systems, and all royal protocol has to give in to the urge, 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 commoditified cultural production is also borne out by the emphasis (which is in absolute contradiction with historic village patterns) on identical movements according to neat geometrical patterns, 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. The representatives of the urban Kazanga troupe moreover advertise themselves through exceptional commodities such as shoes (which are not only expensive, but offensive and impractical in village dancing), expensive coiffures, sun glasses and identical T-shirts imprinted for the occasion. The commoditification element is also 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 as they have been told), and
- the supervising elite (who in their turn single themselves out through such commodities as formal jackets and ties).

8.2.3. Embodiment and virtuality

As we have seen under the previous heading, 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 commoditified 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, even to an outside world where, before the creation of Kazanga in its present form, that 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 (for each dance troupe again represents 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.

In this incorporative context one also borrows from a repertoire which has certainly not been commoditified even if it is performative: dressed in leopard skins, around the temples a royal ornament of Conus shells, 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 is no longer mercantile, although it was more so during the nineteenth century), 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 which since the end of the nineteenth century was hardly seen any more in this region; at the climax the king (for that is what he shows himself to be) kneels down and drinks directly from a hole in the ground where beer has been poured out for his royal ancestors – the patrons of at least his part of the Nkoya nation, implied to share in the deeply emotional cheers from the audience. And young women who have long been through girls’ puberty initiation, perform that ritual’s final dance (cf. van Binsbergen 1987), without any signs of the appropriate stage fright and modesty, and with their too mature breasts against all tradition tucked into conspicuous white bras; yet despite this performative artificiality their sublime bodily movements, which in this case are far from censored, approach the village-based original sufficiently close to bring the spectators, men as well as women, to ecstatic expressions of a recognised and shared identity. Obviously

commodification and transformative selection, however important, do not tell the whole story, and even after the recreation of Nkoya culture in the form Kazanga format enough reason for enthusiasm and identification is left for us not to be too cynical about the globalising erosion of the symbolic and ethnic domain.

8.2.4. *Virtuality and the role of the state*

With all the attention for performative control, matched with a strong suggestion of authenticity, it is clear that the Kazanga leadership does not for one moment lose sight of the fact that the festival is primarily an attempt to exchange the one scarce good which one locally has in abundance, competence in symbolic production, for political and economic power. The national dignitaries, more than the royal chiefs, let alone the audience, constitute the spatial focus of the event, and a large part of the programme is devoted to the dignitaries' welcome speeches and other formal addresses. Since the political arena is indeed the right place (and not only in Zambia) to exchange symbolic production for development projects, political allocation, and patronage, the harvest of the series of Kazanga festivals since 1988 is by now eminently manifest in a marked increase of Nkoya participation at the national level, in representative bodies and in the media, and in a marked decrease of the stigmatisation to which they used to be subjected under Lozi domination until well after independence. Kazanga is an example of how an ethnic group can not only articulate itself through symbolic production, but may actually lift itself by its own hairs out of the bog.

8.2.5. *Virtuality and inequality*

Above I have already emphasised how the *categorical* (i.e. logical, conceptual) *equality* ('identity' hardly means anything else) of all Nkoya nationals – in the light of the shared, recently constructed Nkoya identity as manifested at Kazanga – is, by contrast, constantly accompanied by the manifestation of all sorts of inequalities: those between peasants and urbanites, between peasants and salaried workers; elite leaders, performers and spectators. I regret that in the present scope I cannot deal with other, equally interesting inequalities (like those between men and women, and between Christians and traditionalists). Undoubtedly the Kazanga leaders perceive themselves as being altruistically subservient to an abstract ethnic collectivity, but in fact their

ethnic mediation primarily serves their own position, especially when and if their mediation is successful and begins to be reciprocated from the national centre.

8.3. Cultural performance as virtual production

When we see Kazanga as a response to globalisation, then perhaps we can better understand the transformation from spontaneous cultural production to performance, which characterises the festival. When introducing the concept of virtuality in chapter II, I had occasion to refer to twentieth-century analytical philosophy, where a particular class of statements has been identified: those incapable of being either false or true, e.g. 'I promise that I shall come' (Austin 1962; cf. Nuchelmans 1971). Significantly, the term 'performative' has been adopted to denote such statements.

Such an interpretation of the performative quality of behaviour is of special significance in the context of a village society like that of the Nkoya, which is largely dependent on economic self-reliance through agriculture, hunting and gathering. Performative behaviour does not follow the lead of empirical, *productive* thought techniques on which control over the environment, hence survival, depends; it takes a distance from these modes of thought, and moves in a space and time geared to the production not of food, but of imitation food, of symbols. Is this perhaps an answer to the question as to why in Kazanga, under conditions of globalisation, the performative, and not the productive, aspect of culture is so central? As if the productive factor is deprived of all meaning in the modern context, in the festival today that factor is merely vaguely indicated by one or two hunting dances out of a programme packed with scores of dances, but originally, a century ago, Kazanga as a first fruits festival hinged on agricultural production. Such a transition does meet the ecological realities in the land of Nkoya toward the end of the twentieth century CE. During the 1970s and 1980s game, until then fairly abundant, largely disappeared through the massacres which ethnic strangers from Angola wrought with machine guns, while subsistence agriculture as a mode of livelihood has virtually collapsed in the face of drought, urbanisation, commercialisation of agriculture, and the monetarisation of the rural economy. In the erosion of the local production lies the dependence upon the outside world, which is confronted with non-productive performative behaviour. In the context of the village society of western central Zambia the shift from production to performance is the most obvious manifestation of virtuality as an aspect of globalisation.

9. Conclusion

I hope that after my theoretical explorations, the case studies I presented have set some descriptive basis for a further theoretical elaboration of the concept of virtuality in a context of globalisation in Africa today. The kind of problems I have tried to pinpoint continue to stand out in my mind as both relevant and tantalising, and I realise that my own commitment to the study of globalisation is largely fuelled by my hope that somewhere in that sort of perspective these analytical problems which have haunted me for a long time (cf. 1981: ch. 6) may come closer to a solution; but the present booklet makes only a small step towards such a solution, and in the process reveals how difficult it is to capture, in academic discourse whose hallmark is consistency, the contradictions which exist in reality.

I have concentrated, as forms of virtuality, on phenomena of dislocation and disconnectedness in time and space, and have all but overlooked forms of disembodiment, and of dehumanisation of human activity. As Norman Long remarked during a recent conference,³⁹ under contemporary technological conditions new questions of agency are raised. Agency now is more than ever a matter of man / object communication (in stead of primary man / man communication). This means that the formal organisations which I have stressed so much as frames for identity, if based on such man / man agency, are no longer what they used to be. The images of Africa as conveyed in this argument are rooted in years of anthropological participation in African contexts, by myself and others, yet the mechanics of the actual production of these images has involved not only human intersubjectivity (both between the researcher and the researched, and between the researcher and his colleagues), but also solid days of solitary interaction between me and my computer. There is also virtuality for you, of the self-reflective kind so much cherished by our post-modernists. Anthropology may be among the West's more sympathetic globalising projects, but that does not prevent it from being infested with the very phenomena it tries to study detachedly.

Notes

- i Earlier versions of the argument in this working paper were presented on the following occasions: at two meetings of the WOTRO (Netherlands Foundation for Tropical Research) Programme on 'Globalization and the construction of communal identities': in the form of an oral presentation at the Bergen (Netherlands) conference, 15-16 February 1996, and as a paper at the programme's monthly seminar, Amsterdam, 6 May 1996; at the one-day conference on globalisation, Department of Cultural Anthropology/ Sociology of Development, Free University, Amsterdam, 7 June, 1996; and at the graduate seminar, Africa Research Centre, Catholic University of Louvain, 8 November, 1996. For constructive comments and criticism I am indebted to all participants on all occasions, and especially to (alphabetically) Filip de Boeck, René Devisch, Martin Doornbos, André Droogers, Mike Featherstone, Jonathan Friedman, Peter Geschiere, Ulf Hannerz, Peter Kloos, Birgit Meyer, Peter Pels, Rafael Sanchez, Matthew Schoffeleers, Bonno Thoden van Velzen, Rijk van Dijk, Wilhelmina van Wetering, and Karin Willemse. I am especially indebted to Peter Geschiere, Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels as editors of a book in which a much shortened version of the present argument will appear.
- i Cf. Fardon 1995; Featherstone 1990; Forster 1987; Friedman 1995; Hannerz 1992a; and references cited there. Some of the underlying ideas have been expressed decades ago, e.g. Baudrillard 1972, 1981. Or let us remember that, on the authority of Marshal McLuhan (1966), the thought that the world was becoming a 'global village' was a truism throughout the 1980s. In fact, work by Toynbee (1952: 134-5) and his great example Spengler (1993) can be cited to show that the idea of a global confrontation of cultures, with global cultural coalescence as a possible outcome, has been in the air throughout the twentieth century.
- i Notions on space-time compression in globalisation are to be found with Harvey and Giddens, e.g. Harvey 1989; Giddens 1990, cf. 1991: 16f. Some of my own recent work (1996b) suggests that we should not jump to the conclusion that such compression is uniquely related to the globalisation

context. In fact, an argument leading through African divination systems and board-games right to the Neolithic suggests that such compression is an essential feature of both games and rituals throughout the last few millennia of human cultural history.

- i For a similar view Friedman (e.g. 1995), who chides anthropology for having relegated other cultures to the status of isolated communities.
- i E.g. in the context of the work, within the WOTRO programme on 'Globalization and the construction of communal identities', on Ghanaian Pentecostal churches by Birgit Meyer and by Rijk van Dijk; for a comparable case from Southern Africa, cf. the Zion Christian Church as studied by Jean Comaroff, which started a debate about the political significance of these churches. Cf. van Dijk 1992; Meyer 1995; Comaroff 1985; Schoffeleers 1991; van Binsbergen 1993c; Werbner 1985, 1986.
- i Welbourn & Ogot 1966.
- i E.g., IBM 1987 lists as many as 56 entries starting on 'virtual'.
- i Cf. Austin 1962: statements which cannot be true or false, e.g. exhortations, or the expression of an ideal or an intention.
- i Korff 1995: 5. On virtuality and related aspects of today's automated technology, also cf. Cheater 1995; Rheingold 1991.
- i And, incidentally, even in that Arabian culture such schemes were already highly virtual in that their symbolism and iconography did not derive from the local society of that time and age, but carried (in clearly demonstrable ways, open to the patient scrutiny of scholarship even though inviting, at the same time, the brooding fantasies of New Age) distant echoes of Hebrew, pre-Islamic Arabian, Old-Egyptian, Northwest African, Sumerian, Akkadian, Indian, Iranian and Chinese systems of representation...
- i Cf. van Binsbergen 1995a, where a cultural relativist argument on democracy is presented.
- i Cf. the collections by Comaroff & Comaroff 1993 and Fardon 1995; moreover, Geschiere c.s. 1995; de Boeck 1996; Meyer 1995; Pels 1993; and perhaps my own recent work.
- i How many? That varies considerably between regions and between countries. The post-independence stagnation of African national economies, the structural adjustment programmes implemented in many

African countries, the food insecurity under conditions of civil war and refugee-ship, the implementation of rural development programmes – all these conditions have not been able to bring the massive migration to African towns to an end, even if their continued growth must of course be partly accounted for by intra-urban reproduction, so that even in African towns that were colonial creations, many inhabitants today are second, third or fourth generation urbanites. Typical figures of village-born, first generation urbanites available to me range from an estimated 20% in Lusaka, Zambia to as much as 60% in Francistown, Botswana.

- i For Gluckman's most mature statement on this point, cf. Gluckman, M., 1971, 'Tribalism, ruralism and urbanism in South and Central Africa', in: Turner, V.W., ed., *Profiles of change: Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960, III*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 127-166.
- i Nor should we over-generalise. Mitchell's seminal *Kalela dance* should be contrasted with the work of Philip and Ilona Mayer, which was far more subtle, and much better informed, on rural cultural material as introduced into the towns of Southern Africa; cf. Mayer 1971; Mayer 1980; Mayer & Mayer 1974.
- i Cf. Geuijen 1992; Kapferer 1988; Nencel & Pels 1991; Pels & Salemink 1994; Tyler 1987; and references cited there.
- i Cf. Mitchell 1956, 1969; Epstein 1958, 1967.
- i E.g. van Binsbergen 1981; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985.
- i Hamnerz 1992a: 17, 273; taking his cue from: Cohen & Comaroff 1976.
- i The following section is based on a text which I wrote in 1994 as a statement of intent for the WOTRO Programme on 'Globalization and the construction of communal identities', thus opening the way for my student Thera Rasing to submit her own fully-fledged application for Ph.D. research as based on her previous M.A. work. This was approved, so that before long we may expect her more detailed ethnographic and analytical answers to the questions raised in this section. Meanwhile, cf. Rasing 1995. Of the vast literature on puberty initiation in South Central and Southern Africa, I mention moreover: Creten 1996; Corbeil 1982; de Boeck 1991, 1992; Gluckman 1949; Hoch 1968; Jules-Rosette 1979-80; Maxwell 1983: 52-70; Mayer 1971; Mayer & Mayer 1974; Richards 1982

(which includes a 'regional bibliography' on girls' initiation in South Central Africa); Turner 1964, 1967; van Binsbergen 1987, 1992b, 1993b; White 1953.

- i This embarrassment created by the dominant paradigm is probably the main reason why the study of African historic urban ritual is much less developed than the empirical incidence of such ritual would justify. Such studies as exist have tended to underplay the historic, rural dimension in favour of the modern dimension (Mitchell 1956; Ranger 1975b), or have drawn from other founts of inspiration than the dominant Durkheimian paradigm (Janzen 1992; van Binsbergen 1981).
- i Devisch 1984, 1993, Devisch et al. 1995; Devisch & de Mahieu 1979.
- i Devisch 1995; cf. Caubergs & Devisch 1995; Devisch 1996.
- i See above, bibliographical footnote 20 on female puberty ritual in South Central Africa.
- i Geschiere, 1996a, being the provisional English version of the introductory chapter of: Geschiere c.s. 1995; Schoffeleers 1996. Initially an extensive comment at a one-day conference marking Ineke van Wetering's retirement from the Department of Anthropology / Sociology of Development, Free University, 12 April, 1996, the present chapter has now been submitted, in slightly expanded form, for a Festschrift for Terence Ranger, to be published as a special issue of the *Journal of Southern African Studies*.
- i A reference to my initiation as a spirit medium in the early 1990s and my subsequent practice as a traditional healer in Botswana, cf. van Binsbergen 1991; revised version in: van Binsbergen, in preparation; also cf. van Dijk & Pels 1996. But much earlier, in his Wiles lectures delivered before the University of Belfast, 1978, my inspiring senior colleague and friend Terence Ranger found occasion to embellish his discussion of my analysis of religion including sorcery in western central Zambia with details as to how during field-work the local population considered me a witch. Needless to say that these lectures were never published. Cf. van Binsbergen 1981; Ranger was referring to my earlier, preliminary statements, e.g. van Binsbergen 1976.
- i Cf. Probst 1996. I am grateful to my colleague Rijk van Dijk for an extensive comment on this section.

- i Redmayne 1970; Ranger 1972; van Dijk 1992; and extensive references cited there.
- i A few examples out of many: Melland 1967; Mackenzie 1925.
- i In his oral presentation at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Sociology of Development, Free University, Amsterdam, 12 April 1996, Schoffeleers admitted that in Malawi the term *mchape* carries general connotations of witchcraft; and regardless of the issue whether witchcraft might have been a more prominent aspect of the Chisupe movement than his argument suggests (apparently it was not), he also pointed out that given the primary audience he has in mind for his paper (notably, producers and consumers of African Theology) he could not afford to enter into a discussion of witchcraft if he did not want to lose that audience.
- i Cf. Ranger 1967, 1968a, 1968b, 1968c, 1970, 1975b, 1978; Ranger & Kimambo 1972; Ranger & Weller 1975.
- i For a preliminary account, e.g. van Binsbergen 1996d.
- i On this point, cf. Schoffeleers 1979; van Binsbergen 1981.
- i It may even pervade the discourse and practice of Independent churches, e.g. the Botswana case of the Guta ra Mwari church: van Binsbergen 1993c.
- i van Binsbergen 1996b, and references cited there.
- i Anthropological and oral-historical fieldwork was undertaken in Western Zambia and under migrants from this area in Lusaka, in 1972-1974, and during shorter periods in 1977, 1978, 1981, 1988, 1989, 1992 (twice), 1994 (twice) and 1995. I am indebted to the Zambian research participants, to the members of my family who shared in the fieldwork, to the Board of the African Studies Centre for institutional and financial support since 1977, and to the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO) for a writing-up year in 1974-75.
- i Very recently a third theme is emerging: the blurring of ethnic boundaries in Western Zambia, the attenuation even of Nkoya/ Lozi antagonism, in favour of a pan-Westerners regionalism opposing the Northern block which is President Chiluba's ethno-political base. This at least is the situation around the National Party, which in bye-elections in Mongu (the capital of Western Province) in early 1994 defeated both MMD and UNIP.

As a result of the general elections held during the 1994 Kazanga festival, the society's office of national chairman went to the leading NP official in Kaoma district.

- i The following paragraph is based on: van Binsbergen 1992a, 1994a.
- i WOTRO Programme on 'Globalization and the construction of communal identities', Bergen (The Netherlands) conference, 15-16 February 1996.

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