'CULTURES DO NOT EXIST'

EXPLODING SELF-EVIDENCES
IN THE
INVESTIGATION OF INTERCULTURALITY

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to Richard Fardon

1.   Introduction

When upon Heinz Kimmerle's retirement in 1995 the chair of intercultural philosophy at the philosophical faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, fell vacant and the post was advertised, candidates were examined in the light of two major requirements: a sound knowledge of at least one non-European 'culture', and acquaintance with the Western philosophical tradition. As an anthropologist with extensive fieldwork experience in five African situations[1] I for one can claim the first point, but precisely that relative expertise has inspired the provocative title of this argument, originally delivered as my inaugural lecture when I succeeded Kimmerle. 'Cultures do not exist', I will argue. Not so much in order to render the designation of the chair on intercultural philosophy inherently problematic (for surely if cultures do not exist, the adjective 'intercultural' as characterisation of a branch of philosophy cannot have any meaning), but in order to indicate the hand luggage[2] that I shall take with me to Philosophers' Land. This hand luggage comprises

- first, insights that have been gathered in empirical research and that intercultural philosophy ought to take to heart; but also, secondly,
- philosophical problems that have been largely ignored in the context of cultural anthropology's empiricism as for over a century has constituted the main mode of producing allegedly valid intercultural knowledge in academia.

This indicates the tension currently characterising my work. I have recently given up my chair in the social sciences for one in philosophy, but clearly I am not (yet) a philosopher — I continue to have difficulty reproducing and articulating ideas that seem to be self-evident to every philosopher, and I I think I detect insurmountable problems in philosophical texts that to philosophers appear to be particularly well argued.

The structure of my argument is as follows. To begin with, I shall indicate how the concept of 'culture' has taken root as a key concept in our contemporary social experience and in philosophy. Precisely because it has done so, it is of the greatest importance to subject to empirical and philosophical scrutiny such self-evidences as attach to 'culture'. Now more than ever, the process of globalisation has brought together within a common political space a plurality of self-reflexive and militant identities; as this text is being finalised for the press, the truth of this statement is driven home by the violence against military and civilian targets in the USA on 11th September, 2001, probably caused by Middle Eastern Muslims holding just such a diabolical enemy image of the USA as the Americans do of them. *An adequate analysis of this kind of situations will be of decisive importance for the fate of humanity in the first centuries of the third millennium CE.*[3] As a next step, I shall explore the conditions under which my claim that 'cultures do not exist' may acquire meaningfulness. Since in this connection I put forth the social sciences as an example for philosophy, I am compelled to discuss the place of empirical knowledge within philosophy. I shall stress that intercultural philosophy ought to take into account such knowledge as the empirical sciences have gathered through explicit and well-tried methods; and here I am thinking particularly of the empirical discourse on African ethnicity, and of the neo-diffusionist arguments in favour of extensive cultural connections in space and time informing Africa's cultural history and its place in the world as a whole. But as a next step I shall argue — by reference to my own complex itinerary through Africanist cultural anthropology — how this particular empirical science, despite its unmistakable relevance for intercultural philosophy, is yet so philosophically naïve, and so disposed towards a North Atlantic epistemological perspective from an epistemological point of view, that cultural anthropology can at best constitute a mere point of departure for our theoretical explorations of interculturality. Finally I posit that intercultural mediation ideally situates itself beyond any specific cultural orientation, which allows me to characterise intercultural philosophy as the search for a transgressive and innovative, metacultural medium for the production of knowledge. It is the quest itself which makes this a commendable undertaking, even though its metacultural goal is unlikely to be ever reached.

2.   *'Cultures' in contemporary society*

Ever since the end of the eighteenth century CE, in Western scholarship and subsequently in North-Atlantic society as a whole the concept of 'culture' has developed to acquire such great self-evidence that it has almost assumed a transcendental nature; in the latter respect therefore the concept of culture has come to be somewhat comparable to time, space, causality and substance — which in Kant's philosophy are the basic categories utilised by human thought

but not derived from sensory perception.[4] Appropriated by the wider society, the concept of 'culture' combines claims of totality, unicity, integration, boundedness, and non-performativity. According to this conception, a human being does at any one moment of time have, not a plurality of intersecting 'cultural orientations' co-existing simultaneously, but only one 'culture', and in that 'culture' she lives her entire life as if she has no option, as if displaying the distinctive features that mark her as an adherent of that culture are free from ostentatiousness and from stategically calculated effect upon her social environment — free from performativity. The claim that such an allegedly unitary culture forms an integrated whole, springs forth from two kind of considerations:

- people's assumption that, as far as human individuals are concerned, whatever is cultural, is the attribute of *one (allegedly integrated) individual personality*;
- 'culture' produces a meaningful world, that is to say produces the illusion of a self-evidence that can only exist by virtue of the fact that no manifest limitations and boundary conditions are imposed upon that self-evidence in the consciousness of the bearer of that culture; for the sake of maintaining that illusion of self-evidence, of a self-evident universe contained in, and implied by, 'a culture', such a 'culture' has to be holistic (i.e. geared to a totality, a whole), and by consequence is implicitly intolerant of diversity.

In the last analysis we are dealing here with an implicit claim to universality made by the individual for her 'culture'. This mechanism was already recognised by Kant when he claimed that whoever considers something beautiful, takes it for granted that it would be beautiful to anyone.[5]

Moreover the above, unitary concept of 'culture' implies the assumption (and here lies the link with ethnicity) that this one 'culture' can be adequately designated by means of an ethnonym: '*Dutch* culture', '*Chinese* culture', 'the culture of the *Zambian Nkoya*, of the *Nigerian Yoruba*, of the *South African Zulu*', and so one. This produces the classic image that anthropologists have by now largely discarded but that still has wide circulation outside anthropology: the image of Africa as a gaudy patchwork quilt of fundamentally different 'cultures', each of which constitutes an integrated, bounded totality. Nor is this conception of 'culture' limited to that of a merely descriptive category for the human situation: in contemporary public culture, the use of the concept of 'culture' has come to be closely associated with ethical and political judgements based on whether or not the person so judged shows respect for someone else's 'culture'

What does it mean if someone insists that others should show respect for her own 'culture'? It means more or less what follows. In a concrete interaction situation, where a person seeks to reinforce her claims to scarce resources (such

as prestige, the right to vote, a residence permit, access to the markets of housing, education, employment, the liberties listed in catalogues of human rights), that person may explicitly appeal to a certain idea that has already been privileged by public opinion, and by bureaucratic and political practices and regulations. This is the idea that a person, not by her own free choice but by a determination in his innermost essence and totality, represents not only a universal but also a specific (notably *cultural*, or 'ethnic') mode of being human, a mode that she has in common with only a (usually quite small) small *sub*-section of humanity, on the grounds of a history shared with the other members of that sub-section, and expressed through practices specific to that sub-section as acquired through a learning process (e.g. speaking a common language).

In this insistence on respect a number of heterogeneous elements come together in the most surprising way: totality, essentialism, pluralism, the definition and structuring of the public space as multicultural, political strategy, and performativity. The respect claim expresses a conception according to which 'culture' represents a person's total commitment, constituting the essence of that person. 'Culture' becomes the central identity; and like other identities, it legitimates itself by means of the construction of a subject that claims, with Luther: 'Here I stand, I have no option.' Interestingly, the person in question can only exhort others to respect his own 'culture', by himself taking a distance for his cultural existence, objectivating the latter and making it a topic of conversation. And such a distancing makes one aware of the cultural and ethnic otherness of others, of the accidental, contingent, nature of one's own cultural and ethnic identity, as if one had, in fact, an option to end up with a different identity.[6]

This lends a double layer of performativity to the respect claim: that claim is explicitly performed within the public space,[7] on the basis of a conscious distancing from the self, while the self has wanted, effected, perceived, and evaluated, the effect that that claim has on other people. In the contemporary world the convincing, *public stance* of authenticity and integrity (which in itself is performative and therefore inherently self-defeating) is indispensable in order to render *strategic* identity claims successful — in order to gain recognition.

The respect claim displays a typical contradiction of post-modern North Atlantic society: whatever is introduced, in a strategic and performative manner, into the public arena, is no longer allowed to be explicitly discussed in terms of strategy and performativity; on the contrary, public opinion, pressures towards politically correctness (i.e. social etiquette), and even formal socio-legal rules (anti-discrimination legislation) are conducive to a situation where in public-arena expressions these elements are explicitly referred to in terms of 'authenticity'. The concept of 'culture' (as a thinking in terms of 'cultures', plural) embodies this contraction. It is not a sign of bad faith. On the contrary, this contradiction is inevitable given contemporary conditions. Constituting

itself by reference to 'culture', self-identity is always and inevitably situated in a field of tension between self-evidence and performativity. Thus the concept of 'culture' offers a contemporary solution for the perennial problem of society: how to negotiate the tension between individual and community. This makes 'culture' one of the principal empowering concepts at the disposal of political actors in the local, national and global arenas of our time.

The great attraction of this concept of 'culture' turns out to lie precisely in its capability of encompassing and concealing *contradictions*.

A social-science readership, in the present post-Marxist era, would be likely to realise that here I am referring to a formal, highly abstract conception of society, and of any social institution, relationship, situation, and event, not as a structure or flow of concrete objects and persons but as a bundling of contradictions. A philosophical readership however might have to be specifically alerted to such a sociological view. Of course, the contradiction as a model of thought is a precondition for dialectics and has a splendid pedigree in mainstream philosophy. Yet philosophers (with the exception of post-structuralists and Marxists) may be inclined to consider the articulation of contradictions not an end in itself (as it would be for the anthropologist describing the formal abstract structure of a ritual in terms of contradictions between generations, genders, modes of production, conceptions of power and legitimacy, etc.), but as a stepping-stone towards the rational threshing out of these contradictions: if not in some Hegelian synthesis then at least in the elegance of academic prose.

How then does the concept of 'culture' deal with social contradictions? It offers the possibility of defining a central identity within which a person's many identities as the player of many social roles can be re-arranged within a hierarchical framework — which relegates the majority of these identities to a state of being secondary, unessential, invisible, while at the same time reaffirming (in a sense that I consider utterly artificial and performative) the *cultural* identity as that person's deepest essence. This identity is supposed to define not just a partial aspect of an individual's life, not one specific role, but a total life world, whose parts hang together meaningfully and organically have their place within the ensemble — resulting in a situation where the subject can confront the world as if that subject were a monolithic whole, and can find meaning and order in that world. The awareness of such a central and holistic cultural identity is not innate but is explicitly constructed in social communication (in other words, is learned), which often goes hand in hand with the cherishing of a collective historical experience and of selective culturally distinctive features; often also ethnic and cultural mobilisation by an elite is part of the process through which such a cultural identity is being constructed. Nevertheless the actors involved tend to succeed in representing this construction, not as the deliberate human creation of something that was not there in the first place, but as a mere taking consciousness of what allegedly had

always been a person's deepest and innermost essence. Such a construction is in line with modernity's dominant collective representations: the unified, undivided, individual *subject*, and its *identity*. 'Culture' as a universally accepted term in North Atlantic society is a thought machine designed to subjectively turn the fragmentation, disintegration and performativity of the modern experience, into unity, coherence, and authenticity. Thus the illusion of self-evidence and integrity are somehow saved in postmodern times when everyone knows that nothing is self-evident any more nor possesses integrity.

In its insistence on an essential, authentic otherness, and in its dissimulation of performativity, this conception of 'culture' lands us with a huge social problem: it takes for granted, and even rejoices, in the presumed absolute difference alleged to exist between a plurality of positions, and hence freezes the public space to a snake-pit of absolute contradictions, where opposition may persist to the point of mortal combat. The decreased liveability of contemporary society may be attributed, to certain extent, to the ever greater impregnability of an ever greater number of cultural fortresses. Only a few decades ago cultural relativism was simply an expression of the anti-hegemonic, anti-Eurocentric critique of imperialism and colonialism.[8] But now it risks to become a nightmare: a license to reduce contemporary society to an immovable stale-mate of positions between which, on theoretical grounds, no open communication, identification, community and reconciliation is possible any longer; and violence remains as the only way out. However, as the Chinese philosopher Vincent Shen has rightly argued,[9] such insistence on irresolvable differences (however much a respectable philosophical position ever since Nietzsche) is insufficient as a survival strategy for the modern world: in order for us to be able to face the future, we need dialogue, exchange, compromise, between the positions that have been occupied in the name of 'culture'. Intercultural philosophy is nothing but an exploration of the possibilities that exist on this point. Intercultural philosophy, therefore, has a prophetic function, not in the derived sense of foretelling the future, but in the original (biblical) sense of uninvitedly speaking to contemporary society about its ills, predicaments and alternatives, while invoking a transcendent value or being.

3.   *The background of the concept of 'culture' in cultural anthropology and philosophy*

3.1. *Culture in cultural anthropology*

What is the origin of this concept of 'culture'? It has a variegated history but its most common meaning it is the popularisation of a cultural anthropological concept that, in that form, was only coined as recently as 1871, by Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture*.[10] Tylor defines 'culture' as:

'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.'

A century earlier, with Herder[11] 'culture' merely encompassed the so-called higher and public forms of human achievement (religion, art, science, constitutional arrangements); Herder's merit was, however, that he included the peoples outside Europe among those having a measure of 'culture', showing himself surprisingly anti-ethnocentric in this respect.[12] Tylor's breakthrough was to go beyond 'high culture' to include, in his definition of culture, everything that was not given to man by nature, but that he partakes as a member of a human group.

Tylor's was not the last word. From 1900 onwards, in the United States and Great-Britain, prolonged participant observation, carried by mastery of the local language, emerged as the principal empirical tool in cultural anthropology. This means that for the first time one had at one's disposal abundant and convincing, contemporary data on which to base an analysis geared to the distinctions and the meanings that the people under study applied in their own world-view — an analysis that was *emic* in the sense of Pike's paired concepts of *emic* and *etic* as propounded in the 1950s.

The paired concepts of *emic* and *etic* express the distinction between an internal structuring of a cultural orientation such as is found in the consciousness of its bearers, on the one hand, and on the other a structuring that is imposed from the outside. *Etic* has nothing to do with ethics in the sense of the philosophy of the judgement of human action in terms of good and evil. Pike's terminology is based on a linguistic analogy. In linguistics one approaches the description of speech sounds from two complementary perspectives: that of phonetics (hence *-etic*), which furnishes a purely external description, informed by anatomical and physical parameters, revolving on the air vibrations of which the speech sounds consist; and the perspective of phonology, whose basic unit of study is the phoneme (adj. phonemic, hence -*emics*): the smallest unit of speech sound that is effectively distinguished by language users competent in a particular language, basing themselves on the distinctive features of that speech sound. The phonetic features of actually produced speech sounds is subject to endless variation, that can be registered by any observer and by whatever acoustic apparatus, regardless of competence in the particular language in question. By contrast, every spoken language has only a very limited range of phonemes (usually only a couple of dozens). Language users classify the infinite variety of actually produced speech sounds according to the elements of this series of recognised phonemes, and thus determine which words or sentences, consisting of several phonemes, are at hand in a particular situation.[13]

Pike thus codified the two-stage analytical stance (both *etic* and *emic*) of the classic anthropology that had emerged in the second quarter of the twentieth century with such proponents as Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Griaule

and Leiris. Before this development, anthropology had been dominated by analysis in terms of externally imposed analytical schemes (the *etic* approach) such as evolutionism, diffusionism, materialism, theories concerning the fixed and universal phases of aesthetic development, etc. The rise of fieldwork and of an *emic* perspective meant that the empirical horizon of individual studies contracted greatly. *Emic* analysis required that one learned a new language and stayed on the spot for years. Such an investment, and the analysis based upon it, could only take place within a very narrow spatial and temporal horizon: that horizon which the fieldworker could cover by her own individual action — an area of at most a few thousand square kilometres and usually very much smaller, situated in a limited period of time that for the duration of the fieldwork and writing-up was even frozen into a stereotypified 'ethnographic present'. *Gone were the days, in cultural anthropology, of searching for extensive connections in space and time.* The ethnographic monograph became the standard format of anthropological knowledge production, the ethnographer and her book came to identify with the name of the group under study, with the ethnonym. The idea arose that each such a monograph amounted to the description of 'a culture'. Presumably there would be about as many 'cultures' as there are ethnographic monographs, and each 'culture' would be effectively conceived after the model of the book: bounded, internally integrated, consistent, unique — a whole that is well described with the term 'holistic'. It became the anthropologist's task to seek entrance to an 'other culture',[14] conceived as a total, bounded, integrated, and non-performative form of human existence — as a nearly impregnable fortress. Until quite recently, this view has determined the pathos and the rhetoric of fieldwork and ethnography. Henceforth not only our vision of continents outside Europe, but also the anthropologist's individual career was to be organised around the ethnographic standard monograph. Cultural relativism became the operative term for the respect that anthropologists, and the outside world, owed to this fieldwork-related celebration of distinctive otherness. Its emergence no doubt had to do with the way in which individual anthropologists positioned themselves on the North Atlantic academic market of intercultural knowledge: as monopolists peddling their own unique knowledge of the reified culture where they had done individual fieldwork.

Also in another way was cultural relativism instigated by the practice of fieldwork. On the one hand fieldwork, as an *emic* activity, claims the most far-reaching intersubjectivity between fieldworker and host population; but on the other hand it is a lonely and unique experience that essentially escapes external critical assessment and hence among fellow-professionals is scarcely conducive to an intersubjectivity based on shared external analytical (i.e. *etic*) abstraction from the local culture under study. For this methodological dilemma the dogma of cultural relativism has offered a safety net: under the aegis of cultural relativism it became ideologically impossible, in professional anthropological circles, to express doubt about the specific pronouncements of ethnographers;

for since fellow professionals lacked the prolonged personal experience with the local ethnographic context under study, such doubt could only be based on the *etic* extrapolation of connections that had merely been established for another 'culture', by applying an *emic* analysis specific to that other 'culture'... Henceforth the professional stance of anthropologists would be a combination of intradisciplinary avoidance[15] *in academia*, among anthropological colleagues, combined with the myth of such limitless communication in the field as could yield a comprehensive and allegedly valid view of the local 'culture' under investigation in the field. Anthropological restudies of the same community by different fieldworkers have demonstrated[16] that this methodological dilemma is virtually without solution, a state of affairs that casts severe doubt on anthropology's claims of constituting a scientific discipline.

Whoever took up the academic study of cultural anthropology in The Netherlands in the early 1960s, still had to learn the anthropological definition or definitions of culture as an unmistakably technical term, as a far from obvious addition to the common vocabulary[17] with which one had left secondary school. But in the course of the four decades that have since elapsed, the concept of culture has spread world-wide (among the western Indo-European languages, but also outside) to become one of the most frequently used and taken-for-granted terms by which to express the contemporary world, its variety, and especially its conflicts. The concept of culture was transformed from an academic technical term to a self-evident, common societal concept that nowadays is on the lips of practically any social actors regardless of their class or education. This transformation is closely related to the rise, in the last quarter of the twentieth century within the North Atlantic society, of a migrant population that stood out both in terms of geographical origin and of somatic characteristics. Another major factor of this transformation has been the cultural globalisation of our daily life, as the result of new techniques of communication and information that led among other effects to frequent displacements across great distances. More than ever before it is evident that no cultural situation is homogeneous, that no culture exists in isolation, and that cultural specificity can only occur by virtue of a local, parochial boundary maintenance in the face of an expanding, world-wide field of locally available and perceived cultural alternatives.

3.2. Culture in philosophy

Also philosophers today frequently utilise the concept of 'culture'; it is even one of the two constituent lexical elements in the expression 'intercultural philosophy', whose foundations my Rotterdam chair seeks to investigate. It is remarkable to what great extent philosophers (who usually are very critical in their use of concepts) have taken concepts as 'culture', 'cultures', 'cultural specificity' and 'interculturality' for granted, for self-evident — as if the human

condition could not be thought otherwise but in terms of a plurality, of a 'multiversum', of 'cultures'.[18]

The following is a possible, perhaps even obvious, definition of 'intercultural philosophy' that remains so close to everyday language use that it takes aboard the entire loading of 'culture' as a pre-scientific societal concept used by general actors in the modern world:

> taking as its point of departure the existence, side by side, of a plurality of mutually distinct 'cultures', intercultural philosophy investigates the conditions under which an exchange can take between two or more different 'cultures', especially an exchange under such aspects as knowledge production of one culture about another; tolerance or intolerance; conflict or co-operation in the economic, social and political domain.[19]

In a more specific form of the above we would conceive of intercultural philosophy as the search for a *philosophical intermediate position* where specialist philosophical thought seeks to escape from its presumed determination by any specific distinct 'culture'. The following has been a common path along which philosophers have sought to effect such an escape: we render explicit the traditions of thought peculiar to a number of cultures, and we subsequently explore the possibilities of cross-fertilisation between these traditions of thought. By doing so, the emphasis is not on the philosophical enunciation of such intercultural practices in which non-philosophers are involved, but on the philosophical practice itself; and the central issue to be problematised is not the fact (or the illusion; see the final section of this argument) of communication across cultural boundaries, but a comparison of conceptual contents on either sides of such boundaries — as if intercultural communication in itself is a given that may already be taken for granted. Under the heading of 'non-western' or 'comparative' philosophy such a form of intercultural philosophy is frequently engaged in but — to my mind — prematurely so, as long as the central concept of 'interculturality' (i.e. the fact, the conditions, and effects of communication across cultural boundaries) has been insufficiently analysed in its own right. It is as if we concentrate all our efforts on seeking to determine the fur coat pattern resulting from a cross between a zebra and a giraffe, without asking the question of whether such a cross could ever produce viable offspring in the first place.

Also in the more specifically 'comparative-philosophy' approach to interculturality, philosophers tend to take their cue from a concept of 'culture' that is holist in nature, assuming an existential cultural identity that is the opposite of performative; such a concept coincides with the socially accepted concept of 'culture', which because of its built-in contradictions is directly linked to social power relations and ideological mystification. Thus the

philosopher risks to become the slave or the mouth piece of his own society, at the very moment when he seeks to think away from the latter's cultural structuring, and to apply a comparative perspective. Genuinely philosophical analysis would on the contrary consist in the attempt to expose terms that have become self-evident and are taken for granted, and to replace them — with good and explicit reasons — by other terms, that are likely to offer new insights since they are detached from the societal tissue of power and ideology, for instance as neologisms which never had that kind of social embedding in the first place.

Meanwhile it is easily understood why, of all people, intercultural philosophers have borrowed the concept of 'culture' from cultural anthropology. Let us consider these reasons now.

3.3. Philosophers against philosophical ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism

In the first place the concept of 'culture', with its implied cultural relativism, offered philosophers the possibility to take a critical distance from Eurocentrism[20] and ethnocentrism as characteristics of the main stream of Western philosophy from Hegel to Rorty and the French post-structuralist philosophers. Hegel's ethnocentrism and his contempt of Africa have been well documented.[21] Rorty's ethnocentrism is evident, conscious, and he shows it off.[22] The reproach of ethnocentrism is laid at the doorstep of the French post-structuralists — Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault — by Rattansi.[23] Nonetheless the latter allows himself to be largely inspired by their work for his post-colonial theory of racism, feminism and North Atlantic hegemony. Foucault travelled widely, held (or was considered for) intercontinental appointments, yet (with the exception of his notes on the Iranian revolution of 1978) in his philosophical and historical analyses almost completely limited himself to the North Atlantic; this however did not prevent him from profoundly inspiring thinkers with a background and identity outside the North Atlantic, as is clear from Mudimbe's seminal *The Invention of Africa* (1988) — an emphatically Foucaultian book, although it is firmly based on the early Foucault and overlooks the developments in the latter's work after the 1960s.[24] To the French philosophers mentioned by Rattansi we might add Deleuze and Guattari. In their work the exotic Other is repeatedly appropriated, in the most stereotypical fashion, merely in order to add further contrast to these authors' statements concerning their own, North Atlantic, post-modern cultural orientations. At the same time world-wide cultural diversity and the intellectual problems which it poses, mainly feature in their work in a local and domesticated form: to the extent to which, over the last few decades, France itself has become a multicultural society. But also to Deleuze and Guattari we must grant what Rattansi had to grant to the French post-structuralists he discusses: in principle their work contains the starting point for a non-ethnocentric theorising of processes of globalisation, identity and signification.[25]

But these are only signs of a changing tide. Until recently the Western philosopher implicitly took for granted that there is one, self-evident, social and cultural context (the North Atlantic one), and one self-evident language (his own). Especially the twentieth century has seen a very great investment in the philosophical articulation of language and of social and cultural identity. Yet the philosophical investigation of interaction between *two or more* cultural and social contexts, *two or more* languages, is till in its infancy. Not only interculturality, but also interlinguality is a relatively underdeveloped aspect of mainstream Western philosophy. The twentieth century has seen a very rich harvest of approaches to the philosophy of language.[26] However, also in this domain one has tended to limit oneself to one's own language, as an expression of the philosophical ethnocentrism that takes the North Atlantic society, 'culture', and historical experience, as self-evident and as the universal norm. Philosophical approaches to interlinguality (concerning such topics as translation from one language into the other, and as the ethnographic representation of concepts and representations embedded in a different cultural orientation) have been relatively rare[27] and, what is more important, have not been accorded the central place in today's mainstream Western philosophy that they deserve.[28] In the contemporary world at large, under conditions of globalisation, problems of communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries are of vital political, economic, social and artistic importance. The ecological survival of mankind and the avoidance of a Third and probably final World War over issues of race; ethnicity; the definition of such fundamental concepts as freedom, truth, legitimacy, personhood, and the supernatural; economic hegemony; and North-South inequality to a not inconsiderable extent depend on mankind's increased capability of intercultural and interlinguistic communication, a future goal towards which philosophy is to deliver models of thought. Once again I may remind the reader of the prophetic mission of intercultural philosophy.

Meanwhile it is good to realise that currently not only the anthropological, but also the philosophical practice is based on the tacit assumption of the possibility of adequate translation — despite the existence of philosophical theories, such as Quine's, claiming the indeterminacy of translation. Contemporary philosophers, including those in the most entrenched Western position, rely on a large number of predecessors, who wrote in the following languages among others: Greek, Latin, Italian, Arabic, Hebrew, French, English, German, Spanish, Russian, Polish, Danish, Dutch and Afrikaans. The great majority of philosophers only command one, two or three of these languages at the specialist level necessary for philosophical discourse and for independent research in the history of philosophy. Manifestly it is accepted practice that even professional philosophers consult the great majority of relevant philosophical texts in translation. Now in Western philosophy we are only dealing with two large linguistic families, Indo-European and Afroasiatic (with the sub-family of

Semitic, including Arabic and Hebrew); in intercultural philosophy the problem is substantially more complex, since this field in principle encompasses all[29] current and extinct languages of the world.[30] It is important to stress that philosophers in their everyday practice give every indication of a solid, self-evident trust in their own and other people's capability of interlinguality — *pace* Quine. This does not make them our best *prima facie* guides in the exploration of problems of interlinguality as an aspect of interculturality.

Modern philosophy's ethnocentrism is probably, more than anything else, and far from being the manifestation of a sinister anti-South complot, merely a pardonable simplification: within one language, one cultural orientation, most philosophical problems are already highly aporetic — impossible to ford (as least not by pedestrian means...), like a deep and wide river. Yet intermeshing plurality, in combination with people's identitary retreat inside apparently unassailable boundaries, is the central experience of the contemporary world, and in this light Western philosophy's standard simplification of its problem field to just one language and one culture is increasingly unacceptable.

3.4. Culture and difference

Also the second reason why philosophers have taken over the Tylorian concept of 'culture' is largely internal philosophical:[31] the convergence of the concept of culture with the creation, by post-structuralists such as Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, of a sophisticated conceptual apparatus for the thinking and handling of *difference*. Here the logocentric fascination with binary contradictions, which has captivated Western thought from the Presocratics right up to Hegel, Marx and the twentieth-century structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss, suddenly appeared in a different and critical light. Post-structuralism, which as a strategy of difference contained the possibility both of deconstructing and of affirming identity at the same time, came after two major intellectual movements (marxism, structualism) which relegated the diversity of 'cultures' to the status of an epiphenomenon; for both movements denied the specificity of distinct cultures in the light of some postulated more fundamental condition ('the historical inevitability of the stuggle over material production and appropriation' in marxism; or alternatively, 'the innate binary structure of the human mind' in structuralism) effectively reducing *emic* otherness to *etic* samenness. With the realisation that the binary opposition is a figure of thought whose two poles in fact may to some extent (like the *ourobouros* snake biting its tail in ancient Hermetic and alchemistic symbolism) contain each other and dissolve into each other, doubt was cast on two major strategies of thought, hitherto taken for granted:

(a) the reduction of otherness to sameness (as in Marxism and structuralism), and

(b) the entrenched conception of otherness as amounting to an absolute and irresolvable difference (as in Shen's dilemma).

Both strategies are of prime political importance in the contemporary globalising world: under the hegemonic onslaught of North Atlantic social, cultural, scientific and political forms, ultimately backed by the superior military power of the NATO and particularly the USA, there are strong pressures upon any person, community and polity outside the centre of power, to either submit to being co-opted into sameness (a), or to be subjected to exclusion as irretrievably different (b). For the post-structural 'philosophy of difference', difference becomes a basis for a recognition of the other as both equivalent and other — as a basis for respect instead of either appropriative imposition (a) or exclusion (b). At the same time the philosopher is reminded of the possibility that whatever samenness to self he believed to recognise in the other, might well be vain self-projection, appropriation, and subjugation — and for this reason grand schemes as to some ultimate, underlying convergence of mankind, of all cultures and languages of the world, of all Old-World cultures, of all philosophical traditions world-wide, of all African cultures, etc., are treated with healthy suspicion. The difference-orientated intercultural philosopher wholeheartedly affirms what anthropologists had discovered decades earlier: culture is a machine for the production of difference, especially where initially there was undifferentiated and unarticulated sameness. For intercultural philosophy the anthropological concept of 'culture' turns out to be a tool for the articulation of collective positions of difference that may count as accepted points of departure for social and political action, in such a way that any attempt to merge these positions of difference into a higher unity will be dismissed as a (modernist or hegemonic) assault on their integrity.[32]

But while this is a laudable position, that converges with the cultural relativism dominating anthropology from the mid-twentieth century onward, there is a price to be paid for the philosophical adoption of the anthropological concept of culture: Shen's dilemma then can no longer be solved. Cultural relativism, which was ushered into intercultural philosophy with the best of intentions, ultimately means an impediment towards the fulfilment of intercultural philosophy's most urgent social responsibility.

Philosophers have taken over the Tylorian concept of 'culture' as a strange body, a black box, without attempt to attune it systematically to other contemporary philosophical concepts such as category, subject, mind, the state, etc. In philosophy the concept of 'culture' has an interesting history that however does not lead straight to Tylor. The origin of the concept lies in Roman antiquity: Cicero's *cultura animi* in the Stoic sense of spiritual exercise through reticence and respectful sociability. An absolute concept of 'culture' as referring to human action within a society was first used by the seventeenth-century theoretician of natural law Pufendorf. When one century later Herder added to

this the notion of historicity, and began to speak of the 'culture' of specific peoples, the basis had been laid for a philosophy of culture. And such a philosophy of culture did materialise, with considerable delay, in the beginning of the twentieth century, with philosophers like Dilthey, Rickert, Cassirer and Simmel; but it was to address almost exclusively European culture.[33] Even Spengler's world-wide perspective, which at first view would have little that is condescending vis-à-vis other civilisations,[34] had yet been inspired by the question as to the future of European civilisation.[35] The German school of cultural philosophy around 1900 counted however among its ranks one writer who inexhaustibly and with visionary powers wrote about non-Western civilisations: Max Weber; but he can scarcely be considered a philosopher any more. The main achievement of this phase of the philosophy of culture was the development of a macro perspective on civilisations and cultures as totalities, occasionally (Rothacker, Gehlen)[36] in confrontation with nature in the context of the historical genesis of man at the beginning of the Palaeolithic. Such philosophy of culture did have a profound effect on the social sciences in many respects (particularly it stressed the hermeneutic stance of *Verstehen*, that soon was to be popularised through Weber's writings),[37] but its concept of 'culture' proved a dead-end. If contemporary philosophers use the concept of 'culture' this is not in continuity with the philosophy of culture in Germany around the turn of the twentieth century, but in the sense of contemporary cultural anthropologists as heirs to Tylor. As the authoritative *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* states, almost with relief:

> 'Die empirische K[ulturanthropologie] hängt mit der Kulturanthropologie der deutschen philosophisch-geisteswissenschaftlichen Tradition nicht zusammen.'[38]

Before 1960 (when Winch initiated the important debate on rationality and the analysis of exotic cultures)[39] philosophy could scarcely offer an elaborate discourse on the encounter between 'cultures' at the micro level of individual participants and their concrete interaction situations, or on the production of knowledge at the boundary claimed to exist between 'cultures'. It is only for a slightly longer period that the sub-discipline of 'comparative philosophy' has existed; here the European, Chinese and Indian traditions — often characterised as 'cultures' in the sense critiqued above — are scrutinised for the extent to which they possess parallel themes. Islamic and African philosophy offer specific problems of classification for this sub-discipline. Islamic philosophy does so in that, in the few centuries that it can be said to have flourished (notably in the 3rd-5th century AH, i.e. in the 8th-11th centuries CE), it remained so close to classic Greek philosophy as to be virtually a branch of that tradition; African philosophy poses a classificatory problem because it is either very old but largely unrecorded (a point of view held by many passionate

defenders of African philosophy), or (as Hountondji would have it) new and largely tributary to the North Atlantic academic philosophical tradition.

Understandably, contemporary philosophers have given in to the temptation of adopting the anthropological concept of 'culture', and to apply it within their own philosophical arguments without further revision. Thus by the middle of the twentieth century philosophy ended up with a concept of 'culture' that displayed heavily holistic and essentialist traits just like in that concept's original cultural anthropological setting, and that was too naïve to problematise the performative aspects of cultural identity. However, especially in the last thirty years cultural anthropology, of all disciplines, has had no choice but to take a more relative and dynamic view of the concept of 'culture'. The two related main factors of this development have been the emerging theory of ethnicity (see below, section 7), and the need to account analytically for globalisation and the resulting multicultural society of the late twentieth century of the Common Era. This process in anthropology has certainly parallels in philosophy (especially in the post-structuralist philosophy of difference[40] that has been a major inspiration in the development of intercultural philosophy,[41] despite the implicit Eurocentrism for which the most prominent post-structuralists have been chided.

4.   *From 'holistic culture' to partial 'cultural orientations'*

Meanwhile the provocative title of this argument, 'Cultures do not exist', must not be read as if I wish to banish forever the concept of 'culture' from intellectual discourse. Besides, such an attempt would be futile considering the way in which that concept has taken root in the societal discourse of our time, globally and in all walks of life. I am *not* rejecting the idea of specific forms of programming of human representations and behaviour, — a programming that is specific in space and time, that has an internal systematics, that is not idiosyncratic and limited to just one human being but on the contrary is shared — by virtue of learning processes — by a number of people, yet remains limited to a relatively small sub-set of humanity. This idea is based on undeniable empirical factors that every human being sees confirmed innumerable times in his pre-scientific everyday social experience. Such forms of programming I prefer to call, not 'cultures' but *cultural orientations*, in order to avoid the suggestion that on the one hand they order total human life on a grand scale and yet, on the other hand and at the same time, can be considered bounded, integrated and unique.

As long as we admit the situationality, multiplicity, and performativity of 'culture' (a number of crucial insights of which a term like 'cultural orientation' reminds us), there is no longer a stringent reason to banish the words 'culture' and 'cultural' from our philosophical conceptual toolbox. The reader may rest assured: if the inaugural address on which this piece is based, was to mark my

accession to the Rotterdam chair of 'intercultural philosophy', it did not intend to do so by destroying the very notion of 'culture' on which 'intercultural' is inevitably based, nor by destroying the emerging branch of philosophy designated by that notion.

If the cultural is a form of programming, then it would be characterised by a systematic aspect rather than by the absence of systematics. The contradiction between structuralists and post-structuralist resides, among other points, in the post-structuralists casting doubt on the systemic nature of the cultural experience. This contradiction arises, in part, from the erroneous choice of too high a level of abstraction. If one conceives of 'cultures' as bounded, integrated totalities that may adequately designated by means of an ethnonym,[42] and within which a human being can lead a complete life from morning to evening and from birth to death, without necessarily crossing into other 'cultures', then it would inevitably come to light that the claim of a cultural systematics is an illusion, behind which lies in reality the kaleidoscopic effects of multiple cultural orientations that criss-cross each other simultaneously, and each of which is built on systemic principles that are not informing the others.

In earlier centuries the state and a world religion such as Christianity and Islam were often capable of imposing upon this multiplicity of cultural orientations their own hierarchical ordering, resulting in a constellation that might loosely be described as 'Islamic culture' or 'Christian culture'; but today in the North Atlantic the state and world religions are no longer capable of doing so. In the first place there is the specificity of cultural orientations associated with distinct classes, professional groups, levels of education, linguistic communities, religious communities. Even when we limit ourselves to a consideration of those roles that have been acquired by a learning process and that are being played in the public space, we have to admit that practically every human being finds himself at the intersection of *a number* of different cultural orientations, between which there is often no systematic connection.

Take notions of purity. The androgynous tenderness and the psychological immunity to polluting dirt informing my role of a father changing my young children's diapers has nothing to do with the very different stress on very different conceptions of purity which I invoke in totally different social settings activating totally different social roles and identities on my part: e.g. the histrionic display of anger that I summon when finding a hair in the soup served in an expensive restaurant when I am entertaining a visiting professor from Africa; or the undodging sense of impeccable formal purity with which I yield to the tyrannical syntactic requirements of a computer language when writing computer programmes; or the relish with which I use my fingers as ready-made brushes in my amateur painting; or the stoic resignation with which I have daily braved cockroaches, rotten meat, and mouldy staple food in certain parts of Africa under famine conditions.

Cultural systematics do exist within each distinct cultural orientation, but not necessarily between various cultural orientations. Moreover in the context of the contemporary, globalising world there is, in the sphere of private life, nutrition and other forms of consumption, recreation, gender and sexuality, a constantly increasing plurality of life styles at various stages of articulate definition, and all these life styles (each with greater or lesser degrees of distinctness, boundedness, and conspicuousness through a specific name and other boundary markers) yield their own microscopic cultural orientation. The subject who finds himself at the intersection of all these orientations is a fragmented, kaleidoscopic subject to which we would be wrong to attribute a high degree of integration — perhaps it has even disappeared as a subject.[43] It is as if today's secularised, globalising society has more than any other historical societies furthered the fragmentation of the subject. But in a formal sense the situation in other societies is not fundamentally different in that also these societies consist of the bundling (that is only effected at the level of the complex role behaviour and Ego consciousness of individual participants) of a plurality of cultural orientations between which there is no systemic internal correspondence or coherence.

For instance, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the socio-cultural life of the Nkoya people of western Zambia was built up out of the contradiction between two enmeshing cultural orientations: village life, based on autarkic agricultural production and hunting, kinship, and non-violence as the principle governing interpersonal relations; and court life, based on the parasitic, non-productive exploitation of village communities for food, other produce, and human personnel, and governed by the denial of principles of kinship and non-violence.[44]

The anthropological approach in terms of the articulation of modes of production[45] could have such a great success in the 1970s-80s precisely because it was the theoretical expression of the empirical fact that also archaic, non-Western societies display not a totally integrated structure but instead a diversity of orderings, each of which having its own systematics, it own distinct internal logic, such as that theoretical approach analysed — no doubt one-sidedly — from the perspective of production.

If we could at all speak of a system at the level of society as a whole, then it would certainly not be an all-embracing, holistic *cultural* system, but a system of economic and political control — and the economic and the political constitute dimensions of social life that scarcely enter the discourse of structuralists, who otherwise have been the prime champions of the systemic nature of culture.

The most obvious way of identifying the various cultural orientations that may be discerned within one society, is by searching, within the cultural practices of that society, for consistent (in other words systematic) semantic fields that have a *limited* extension and whose limitation consists in their being

denied, challenged, combated or destroyed by other, adjacent, differently structured semantic fields. It is in this way — by assessing the range of application of specific semantic fields in empirically documented mythical and ritual contexts, and ascertaining where this application became excessively contradictory or came into open conflict with other, differently constructed semantic fields — that I was capable of identifying various religious complexes in the society of western central Zambia, each religious complex as the ideological component of a specific mode of production: ancestor veneration, the veneration of royal ancestors, of the High God, of spirits that are not supposed to be bound to specific localised communities, etc.[46]

In this sense, at a much lower level of aggregation than the society as a whole, the distinct cultural orientations do have a systemic character, by definition. Acquiring a cultural orientation through a learning process amounts to programming that systematics onto the behaviour of the individual participants. Of the many cultural orientations that are present in a society, everyone learns a few score in the course of his life, and besides the ethnographer (as well as the trader, the sailor, the diplomat, the itinerant traditional healer, etc.) learns a few that belong to a different society and that are not or hardly present in his own society of origin.

'Cultures' in the holist sense do not exist unless as the illusions of the participants. However, social actors in the world today explicitly utilise the concept of 'culture', and they do so in the same polysemic and contradictory way in which most indigenous concepts are used by social actors. This is a major reason why the concept of 'culture' is hardly useful any more as a technical term for philosophy or empirical social science. Meanwhile, in the hands of social actors, notably for the world that social actors create between themselves, the very concept of 'culture' may bring about effects that are horrifyingly real: the Nazist Holocaust; ethnic cleansing in late-twentieth century Europe and Africa; ethnic politics that have led to the absolute erosion of the constitutional structures of many African states today, in a dual process encompassing first their experiences after territorial decolonisation, then their experiences after the democratisation movement of around 1990; multicultural, migrancy and refugee policies in West European states today that rely on the reference to 'cultures', in the plural, to greatly emphasise the differences between social actors, but that is incapable of curbing the rising feelings of frustration, insecurity, hatred and alienation in those countries; the rise of a mutual enemy image composed of stereotypical cultural traits separating Middle Eastern Muslim Arabs and North Atlantic Americans.

'Unreal in existence, real in effect', is one of the current definitions of the concept of *virtuality*. The contemporary social experience is full of such virtuality. For instance, the concept of 'culture' emerged from the world of science (as an *etic* term), but via the media and the educational institutions it has transformed itself and begins to reverberate in countless feedback like an ill-

adjusted public address system. Members of contemporary, globalising society have appropriated the concept of culture as an empowering *emic* term, no longer controllable from its original base in science. This is only one example among very many processes of dislocation, where cultural products from a specific localisable provenience are appropriated into subsequent contexts that are rather alien to the original one and largely independent from it; in the process, the original product is transformed, whereas the appropriating contexts can be said to constitute itself through the very process of virtualising appropriation.[47] As an *emic* term 'cultures' (plural) is a virtual concept, that is no longer at place in philosophy or in empirical social science unless in order to be deconstructed there in a bid to lay bare its underlying semantic structure and political implications — always in the hope that also such critical deconstruction (like in the present argument) will find its way to the wider society.

5.   *The relativity of an empirical perspective*

For the philosopher the statement 'cultures do not exist' is problematic not in the first instance because of the concept of 'culture', but because of the word 'exist'.

The question concerning existence, and the question concerning the possibilities and conditions of knowledge (knowledge about that which exists), are among the most important ones in philosophy. Empirical science is in no position whatsoever to answer these questions for us, for it thrives itself on the basis of specific — albeit usually implicit — choices from among the many possible answers to the questions concerning being and concerning knowledge. If, for instance, one adopts, like in Buddhist philosophy, the position that the reality to which the senses appear to testify, is merely an illusion, whereas the true Being only becomes knowable after many phases (for most people very difficult, or impossible, to traverse) of meditative distancing from the apparently concrete world of the senses; then from such a perspective the idea of empirical science is absolutely absurd; but whereas the Buddhist school of thought dominated China, among other parts of Asia, for centuries (after which it lost its grip on China), in that same country Taoism, as the older and more persistent school, displayed an orientation towards sensory reality characterised by far greater kinship with Western science.[48]

Empirical science presupposes a kind of realism: the assumption that there is a reality out there that is not limited to consciousness (although it may be in consciousness that the categories are given with which to gather knowledge of that reality), but that has also concrete, factual manifestation in a manner which is in principle independent from consciousness. The dynamics of empirical science take place between consciousness and sensory perception, between concrete fact and category of thought, and between the individual researcher and the collectivity of researchers. On the one hand the collectivity of

scientists that only under far-reaching conditions of method, consistency and conformity admits modes of individual knowledge to the realm of intersubjectivity and thus declares these individual modes to amount to science; and on the other hand there is the social collectivity: the latter's reception of scientific production is the end goal of such production. As I have stressed in the Preface to this book, that reception is problematic: scientific insights may be built into a society's collective representations, but then they cease per definition to be scientific, and many collective representations reflect the science, not of today, but of yesterday. On the other hand, collective representations constitute a major distortive influence on individual and collective processes of scientific observation and conceptualisation in the first place.

Empirical scientists are seldom conscious of the fact that their professionalised form of knowledge production implies a number of essentially arbitrary choices. They can afford this naïveté since, in the course of the last few centuries in the North Atlantic region, empirical sciences have developed into an institution that, within the society where it is found, has come to self-evident, taken for granted, reflecting, underpinning, and increasingly legitimating, power relations — in ways Foucault more than any other modern thinker has helped us to recognise. And here I do not refer in the first place to such power relations as exist within the world of science itself and as are responsible for the fact that the scientific 'state of the art' as accepted by the community of scientists is always a shifting compromise of intra-disciplinary power relations; that is understood. But the power aspect of modern empirical science reaches much further. Such science is not only a nursery for universality claims concerning the reality of the senses — claims such as

- 'V = i * R' (Ohm's law)
- 'photosynthesis is the source of all energy for life forms on earth'
- 'all human societies possess some kind of incest prohibition'.

Because, in the contemporary North Atlantic, empirical science sets the example of truths that are surrounded with great authority and connotations of universality, and has become a major legitimating force, its example breeds in the minds of contemporary citizens the preparedness to accept other universalist claims, those of a socio-political nature, that are determining the contemporary world to a high degree but that, because of their normative or performative nature, cannot possible be based on empirical science. I mean such ideas as

- the self-evident authority of the modern state and of her principal instrument, the formal organisation

- the self-evidently universal nature (if not in application then at least in allegedly universal applicability) of human rights and of the democratic constitutional form of the state
- the self-evidence and inviolability of the subject, of identity, and of 'culture'
- the self-evident claim that universalism has primarily sought North Atlantic social, cultural, political and scientific forms to express itself (as in Hegel's Eurocentrism), which accords to these forms self-evident superiority as underpinning the globally hegemonic project that has characterised the North Atlantic region ever since the sixteenth century.

Such self-evidences, far from being scientific, belong to the collective representations which form the preconditions of the North Atlantic social order.

Manifestly, empirical sciences is just another cultural orientation among the many other such orientations of North Atlantic society; and it is one of extraordinary importance for the production of the self-evidences that not only determine the structure of our own lives but in which also superiority claims reverberate vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Empirical science posits a form of life that in the last analysis may turn out to be Eurocentric and hegemonic. But at the same time it tries to wrench itself free from this particularistic and regional societal grip by making its methods and techniques highly explicit, refined, and intersubjectieve. This is why radical anti-hegemonic discourses make such a point of advocating epistemological alternatives to current empirical science, for instance in the form of a specifically African epistemology,[49] or by reducing — as in Harding's approach — current empirical sciences to the status of merely one specific, culturally determined, local form of knowledge (an ethnoscience), in the midst of the infinite number of conceivable ethnosciences from all over the globe.[50]

With regard to the type of phenomena that is usually studied by the natural sciences, Harding's suggestion that modern science is merely an ethnoscience of the North Atlantic region would at first sight appear to be little convincing. No matter how much we may claim that that natural scientific knowledge is arbitrary, local, and potentially subservient to Eurocentrism, yet planes based on that knowledge do not spontaneously crash into the ground as soon as they venture outside the North Atlantic region, watches keep on ticking, the electromagnetic waves generated under this scientific regime turn out to have an apparently unlimited action radius so that they may be transmitted back to earth via man-made spacecraft travelling to the Moon or even beyond Saturn, and biochemical medicine enjoys it considerable (though by no means unlimited) successes all over the world regardless of the cultural and somatic specificity of its practitioners and its patients.[51] Third World revolutionary movements that radically steer away from North Atlantic cultural orientations, acquire and utilise for the furthering of their cause manufactured products (weaponry, aeroplanes, Information and Communication Technology) whose

successful use in their hands is manifestly not impeded by these movements' being alien to, or even deliberately opposed to, North Atlantic cultural orientations. World-view is simply not the decisive factor for science and technology to work: these weapons work just the same in the hands of bandits who operate without explicit ideological positioning and who, thriving in the many pockets of ineffective state control throughout the Third, Second and increasingly even First World today, are responsible for the increasing privatisation of violence.

The unmistakable success of North Atlantic natural, medical and technical science as based on the dominant epistemologies informing mainstream North Atlantic academic research and academic practice, does not *ipso facto* exclude other epistemologies, from other cultural backgrounds, for the description and explanation of natural phenomena — and many such epistemologies have managed to persist for centuries in their concrete practical niches of agriculture, hunting, metallurgy, house construction, magic, therapy. There they apparently offered an attractive mode of explanation that adequately took care of the necessity of survival precisely within the local natural environment which these alternative epistemologies sought to describe and master. Thinking through the plurality of possible epistemologies for the approach to sensory reality is one of the tasks confronting intercultural philosophy. Natural science today finds itself in a field of tension. To a certain extent it is entitled to the claim of being cosmopolitan, universalist, part of the common heritage of mankind. On the other hand it is to a great extent the specific and recent creation of North Atlantic modernity, charged with a heavy hegemonic burden. This applies a fortiori to the social sciences. The phenomena that the latter study are largely the product of human intentionality and signification. And by virtue of this fact any social scientific epistemology will, to a large extent, have an ethnocentric bias derived from the society (still principally the North Atlantic one) from whose midst social science research is being conceived and executed even if the object of research is to be found outside the North Atlantic (as is often the case for anthropology). The specific social-science epistemology employed constitutes simply one specific choice for the construction of self-evidences, which in the society under study would be constructed differently. Whatever poses as an impartial, objective scientific perspective is therefor in the best case the confrontation between two sets of self-evidences of matching strength but different contents; and in the worst case the denial of the value and the rights of the other society.

In this context it is risky to appeal to empirical social sciences in order to correct current philosophical approaches of interculturality. Yet this is what I am about to do. Worse still, I will go even further and claim that philosophy itself is much more of an empirical science than philosophers are prepared to admit.

6.   *Philosophy as empirical science?*

It is quite usual that philosophy appropriates elements from the empirical sciences, and even though this kind of interdisciplinary borrowings tends to lag a few decades behind the state-of-the-art in the discipline from which is being borrowed, yet without such appropriation philosophy could not pursue fundamental research into the foundations of the empirical sciences.

Some philosophers take the position that the upward flight of philosophy should not be thwarted by empirical 'so-called facts'. Philosophy may then be conceived as the investigation of concepts, methods of argument, and meanings, and hence as the development (with a precarious balance between innovative originality and intradisciplinary intersubjectivity[52]), the testing out and the administration, of language forms capable of articulating the aporias of the contemporary existence, notably in a way that is not yet furnished by other human practices (empirical sciences, belles lettres, other forms of art, politics and religious discourse). In this conception philosophy is a specific practice whose ontological referent, in the last analysis, is the contemporary social experience (in which however the experience of other points in space and time may reverberate, so that also these past and exotic human experiences should be incorporated in the philosophical exercise). From this point of view it would be hard to defend a totally non-empirical conception of philosophy — even though we had to admit the need for a non-empirical component: for technical research leading to ever better tools in the domain of conceptualisation and logic which do not strikingly reflect an experience that is specific in space and time.

Philosophy thus shares with belles lettres the development of language forms that promise a superior insight. However, contrary to the literary writer, the philosopher seldom entirely works for his own account: most philosophical writings thrive on the rendering and interpretation of the thought systems of other explicitly mentioned philosophers and philosophical movements. The sources for the latter constitute an empirical reference that, ontologically, has practically the same status as the data on which literature scholars, historians and cultural anthropologists base themselves. This raises the same questions as to method, disciplinary intersubjectivity, societal appropriation, cultural bias and the resonance of general societal power relations in the production of knowledge. It would be to philosophy's advantage if, for this life-size empirical dimension of its practice, it would lay a greater premium on method, as a lesser premium on originality.

Coming from an empirical scientist who insists on the methods and results of contemporary empirical science as an example for philosophy, my argument here may remind one of that of the physicists Sokal and Bricmont a few years ago.[53] In the most Droogstoppel-like fashion[54] they demonstrate how the appropriation of a contemporary physics idiom has yielded some of the most obscure pages of the most prominent French philosophers. They derive their sense of being right from an experiment that Sokal conducted within the pages

of the cultural studies journal *Social Text*:. There he treated, tongue in cheek, current quantum physics as an esoteric text requiring a post-modern hermeneutics. He reproduced in what he himself considered a nonsensical article the post-structuralist idiom so faithfully that the article was accepted for publication as a serious contribution.[55] Sokal and Bricmont can think of nothing better but to assess the philosophical use of idiom in the light of the conventional meaning of the terms in question in their original physics and mathematics context. This approach smacks of parochialism and essentialism, and is out of touch with the contemporary world at large, where borrowing across boundaries (including disiciplinary boundaries), followed by far-reaching transformative localisation of the borrowed goods at their new destination, is the order of the day. My point of view is fundamentally different from theirs: they do not make the slightest attempt to understand and apply the philosophical use of language in its own intentionality, and they persist in a naïvely uncritical view of their own empirical science, which they simply take for granted as God's truth, without acknowledging its ephemeral and provisional nature.[56] Sokal's post-structuralist reading of modern quantum physics, even if intended as a pedantic hoax, may yet turn out to contain more wisdom than its author credits himself with, and certainly more wisdom than Sokal and Bricmont's debunking of French post-structuralist technical philosophical language. It is precisely the post-structuralist deconstruction of the autonomous subject, of all theoretical positions, which makes it thinkable that an idea, while being in the air and reflecting the contradictions of the age, may inadvertently flow out of the pen of a cynical author who is consciously rejecting that idea.[57]

These reflections on the empirical constraints on philosophy have a direct bearing on intercultural philosophy. For intercultural philosophy it is of the greatest importance to realise that rendering the thought of another thinker or of a tradition of thought is an empirical activity with all attending demands of method. In connexion with the literate philosophical traditions of the Ancient Near East, Islam, South Asia and East Asia, the dangers of blundering are limited, for here there exist rich local forms of philological-critical scholarship of great antiquity, and intersubjectivity between local an North Atlantic specialists can only be achieved at the price of the North Atlantic scholars living up to the high, local standards of technical competence and language mastery. This tradition of non-North Atlantic scholarship also makes it possible to expose and overcome such Eurocentric flaws as the empirical perspective directed to those parts of the world may yet contain — as is clearly manifested by the Orientalism discussion.[58] However, when we are dealing with illiterate traditions of thought, then their recording and interpretation is nothing but a specific form of ethnography. It will have to be situated against the background of the accumulated experience, comparative research and technical criticism — as well as the critique of epistemological naïveté and North Atlantic hegemony — of many thousands of ethnographers who in the course of a hundred years have

occupied themselves with the empirical handiwork of ethnography. On the first instance, ethnography was nothing else but covering with text those parts of the world that had not yet produced their own text. By a process of initial avoidance of adjacent disciplines which is characteristic of the professionalisation of a new discipline (below we shall point out the same pattern for early anthropology) the emergent fields of intercultural philosophy and African philosophy have tended to ignore this methodological heritage and even dissimulate the empirical status of their activities. If they nonetheless rush to the description of African philosophies the way these are manifest in myths, proverbs, and in the oral pronouncements of contemporary thinkers, — then these intercultural and African philosophers are no more entitled to the benefit of doubt than those ethnographers are who persist in their naïve empiricism.

Experienced and well-trained anthropologists, some of the calibre of Marcel Griaule and Victor Turner, made it their life's work to record — by an analysis of myths, rituals, conflicts, depth interviews, and the practice of everyday life — African patterns of thought and their actual contents, either by an external, *etic*, process of rendering explicit the systematics that is implicit in their hosts' patterns of through, or by a more *emic* method of faithfully recording the pronouncements of local thinkers such as Ogotomêlli (studied by Griaule) or Muchona (studied by Turner). Naturally the ethnographic methods of Griaule or Turner are not above all criticism.[59] The point is however that intercultural philosophers, even without engaging in a methodological discussion with the work of Griaule or Turner, think they know better: Ogotomêlli and Muchona would then be denied the status of 'real' 'sages', while the institution of 'the sage' would yet be claimed to occur throughout Africa, but unfortunately unnoticed by all those anthropologists, who inevitably are to be declared to lack all access to authentic African thought...[60]

In such a denial of the potential of cultural anthropology for intercultural philosophy I see an expression — probably unintended — of essentialism and anti-empiricism:

- the claim that there are specifically African essential traits
- that are claimed to be inaccessible to the empirical methods of North Atlantic social sciences
- that only Africans are capable of understanding and articulating
- and whose only trustworthy guardians are the exponents of African and intercultural philosophy
- precisely because the latter take a distance from the canons of empirical (social) science.

I do not think that such an attitude renders, in the long run, a service to Africans. Africa, that has produced mankind and that via Ancient Egypt has made a very great contribution to North Atlantic civilisation, will easily survive the

encounter with empirical science — with this proviso that this should not remain a form of science imported straight from the North with all its naïveté and Eurocentrism, but that Africans will have to continue to explore their own specific variants of empirical research and its methodological canons.

Instead of a rejection of empirical methods in their own practice and in that of other sciences, the anti-empiricist rhetoric among philosophers often takes a different form: that of the careless or ignorant dissimulation of the formidable methodological requirements of valid empirical knowledge production. Thus the appeal to empirical knowledge in philosophical discourse often amounts to statements that are passable at the level of collective representations, but that are insufficiently precise and comprehensive to pass as scientifically grounded renditions of the empirical reality to which the appeal is being made. In regard to such self-evidences as philosophers may claim, essential elements remain out of sight or are swept under the carpet: method, intersubjectivity, the cultural and political over-determination of such self-evidences; thus the value of their arguments is greatly reduced. It characterises intercultural philosophy as a young branch of science that such self-evidences abound there; the habitual approach, in those circles, in terms of a plurality of holistically conceived 'cultures' is a case in point.

Even more of a short-cut available to philosophers in their avoidance of an explicitly empirical methodology, is that of what I might call *canonical botanising*. Here the argument proceeds, from the enunciation of a certain phenomenon, not to the painstaking exploration of that phenomenon with the aid of such empirical research as is usually abundantly available — but to the classification of the phenomenon in question in terms of a certain passage in the work of a canonised Great Philosopher; after which the discussion is dominated by the interpretation of that one passage, as if that would sufficiently underpin such self-evidences as have been claimed in the first place.

An example is Derrida's claim[61] to the effect that writing precedes the oral expression, since anything which may be conducive to inscription, from the earliest prehistory of mankind, is already to be defined as writing: a deliberately snapped twig on a branch, an line drawn with the finger in the sand. The deceptive nature of such an argument, if taken literally, does not *per se* lie in the use of the term 'writing' — for one might put oneself on a nominalistic standpoint and accordingly choose one's definition freely. However, by adopting the contrast between writing and orality, unmistakably conceptual continuity is suggested with the usual definition of writing in the empirical sciences. And from that perspective Derrida's position is absurd. The origin and the oldest forms of writing are well documented; they have been the subject of hundreds of highly scholarly empirical publications.[62] In this literature we have seen the growth of a consensus as to what constitutes writing, on the basis of a careful weighing of the empirical evidence against the background of progressive theoretical sophistication. This consensus defines a full script as a

system, consisting of a finite number of arbitrary, fixed, mutually distinctive and for that very reason mutually related visual elements, which are being used productively (i.e. that an infinite number of combinations may be generated on the basis of a finite number of systematic rules and elements), in such a way that all speech sounds of the specific languages for whose rendering the script is being used, may be represented (more or less adequately) in that script. Such a script represents neither objects, nor ideas, but simply spoken words. In the history of mankind, full writing in this sense has been attested only from the late fourth millennium before the common era, notably from Sumer, Elam, and Egypt. Far more limited precursors of full writing, in the form of pictograms and ideograms, are up to ten thousand years older and go back to the Upper Palaeolithic. Against the background of this empirical tradition it is ridiculously anachronistic to speak of script and writing for the preceding three million years of human history. If we throw overboard the specific characteristics of full writing we can no longer explain the enormous influence that full writing has had on religion, philosophy, science, literature, state formation, law. It is typical of the procedure of canonical botanising that — in favour for one passage from a Great Philosopher — it feels it can ignore the entire, empirically grounded, literature on writing and on the distinctions between types of writing and their implications.[63] Are we not being condescending towards Africans when we pretend that, according to some twisted and indefensible definition, they yet turn out to have writing after all, as if not having writing is the greatest, most dehumanising disaster that could possible happen to a person or to a people? Is such an attitude not somewhat ethnocentric? Strangely, the usual definitions of writing surprisingly allow the African continent (and not just Ancient Egypt) a much more prominent place in the history and distribution of writing than is generally acknowledged.[64] My worry here is not, of course, that apparently undeservingly global recognition would be given to unwritten African traditions of thought. For it has been my life's work as a literary writer, anthropologist, Southern African diviner-priest-therapist (*sangoma*),[65] and intercultural philosopher, to further precisely such recognition. No, my worry is that intercultural philosophers (without explicit adequate empirical methods, and insufficiently aware of their own personal problematic of transference even though the latter could be argued to cause them to distort the African material in the light of their own nostalgic of vicariously identity-affirming projections) would claim to mediate African traditions whereas in fact what they were representing are only figments of these philosophers' imagination, fed more by the North Atlantic philosophical tradition than by an intimate knowledge of illiterate African life.

If intercultural philosophers entrench themselves in a concept of 'culture' that stipulates a countable plurality of holistic 'cultures', and if they approach the empirical dimension of the rendering of other traditions of thought as if no sound methods have been worked out for such as task, then we are well advised

to remind them of contemporary empirical insights in 'culture' and identity, even despite all reservations we have vis-à-vis the empirical sciences for their implicitly naïve and hegemonic nature.

7. *Globalisation and ethnicity*

7.1. Nkoya ethnic identity

In myself the awareness that 'cultures do not exist' awoke during fieldwork in the Zambian capital of Lusaka in the early 1970s. Here the Nkoya ethnic group constituted a small minority of at most a thousand people, who by means of collective rituals (girls' puberty ceremonies, possession cults, and funerary ceremonies) managed to maintain a considerable amount of mutual contact and of continuity with the cultural practices of their distant home in the Zambian countryside. One night I visited a puberty ceremony, as I did so often in those days. While I danced around with the crowd and joined in the singing, I was addressed by a Black middle-aged man, meticulously dressed in a smart chalk-stripe three-piece suit, who despite his corpulence and his game leg made fierce attempts to keep up with the dancing rhythm. He said, in inimitable Zambian English:

'Yesseh Bwana, diss iss áowaa twadísyonaa káwatyaa' — *'You see now, Boss, this is our traditional culture'.*

Taken-for granted cultural identity but also alienation, performativity (consciously playing a role with deliberately sought after effect), and commodification of 'culture' — all united in one person.

In the next quarter of a century I became more and more familiar with the religion and the kingship of the Nkoya, and I ended up as the adopted son of Mwene Kahare Kabambi, one of the kings of this people — at his death in 1993 I inherited the king's bow and 25 km^2 of land. This was the context in which, from 1988, I applied myself to the study of cultural globalisation among the Nkoya in the rural areas, especially the way in which a formal organisation (the *Kazanga Cultural Association*, an ethnic association articulating Nkoya ethnic identity, and largely administered by successful urban migrants) managed to select and transform the local music and dance into an annual ethnic festival, a consecutive and carefully orchestrated *performance* named Kazanga. Since 1988, time-honoured genres of local music[66] and dance have been emphatically *performed* in a format adopted after North Atlantic examples, and before an audience of national-level politicians and other outsiders. The performative nature of this new form of cultural production in the context of the *Kazanga* festival turned out to be closely related to commodification: in former times this symbolic production had for the participants always derived its self-evident

value from the cosmology and the temporal rhythm (in annual seasonal cycles, personal life cycles, and the rise and decline of communities, headmanship and kingships) of the local rural community, but now this value has been dissociated from the local and has become into a commodity, part of the strategies by means of which regional elites seek to acquire power and wealth.

Ethnic articulation with performative and commodified means, such as in *Kazanga*, situates itself in an increasingly politicised space, in which the local cultural orientations have lost their self-evidence by the confrontation with local and global alternative forms of expression, organisation and identity. We would remain absolutely incapable of understanding these processes if we continue to insist on a model of the plurality of distinct, complete 'cultures' existing side by side. Instead, the contemporary social science of Africa presents the following discourse on ethnicity.

7.2. The discourse on ethnicity in African studies today

One of the most inveterate popular misconceptions concerning Africa today is the idea that the population of that continent would in the first place have to be classified into a large number of 'tribes'; each tribe would be characterised by its own 'culture', art, language, somatic features, political organisation including 'tribal chief', and its own 'tribal homeland' or 'tribal territory'; the later would cause the African continent to be a large patchwork quilt of adjacent, non-overlapping, fixed 'tribal areas', between which 'tribal wars' are postulated to go back to remote antiquity.

The tribal model for Africa has sprung from a number of sources most of which have to be situated not in Africa itself but in the North Atlantic region:

- the preference of colonial governments for clear-cut administrative divisions each coinciding with mutually exclusive territories in the landscape;
- the preference of colonial governments for a model of inexpensive indirect administration, that assumed the existence, in the landscape, of local, indigenous administrative territories coinciding with colonial territorial divisions;
- European views concerning the coincidence of 'culture', language, territory and the state — the early modern, particularly Romantic origin of nation formation in Europe;
- the rationalising need, not only among colonial governments but also among industrial enterprises, among the Christian missions, and gradually also among Africans, to label unequivocally the multitude of cultural and linguistic identities at the local, regional and national level;
- while the above factors led to the crystallisation of clear-cut classifications of the African population — mainly on a territorial basis — also African leaders (traditional chiefs involved in indirect rule, early converts to world religions, incipient intellectuals and politicians) seized the opportunity to transform

these new labels and classifications into self-conscious units ('tribes', 'ethnic groups') and to claim, for these units, an identity, a 'culture', of their own (although this usually only amounted to the selection of a few distinctive cultural features as boundary markers), and a history of their own; this process is known as ethnicisation;

- in the absence of other social and religious distinctions, these ethnic classifications, and the local and regional contradictions they suggested by virtue of their being bound to a territory, became the incentives for group formation and for competition in national politics;

- formal politics along ethnic and regional lines also led to networks of patronage along which the elites, in exchange for political support, could offer specific advantages to their ethnic and regional followers; the latter had all the more need for these advantages given the increasing failure of the formal institutions of the post-colonial state;

- even so, ethnicity in contemporary Africa retained a situational nature: some situations are far more ethnically marked than others; an increasing number of situations is, by the people involved in them, primarily constructed in terms of other identities than the ethnic identity, notably in terms of religion, gender, class, professional group, national state. Also it very frequently occurs that people in situations that are emphatically ethnically marked (such as migrants in the ethnically heterogeneous context of the modern city) operate alternately, and with success, in more than one ethnic identity; often also one sheds, at a given moment in life, the ethnic identity that one has had from birth — exchanging this identity either for another ethnic identity that has greater prestige or that represents a local majority, or opting for a different, more universalist kind of identity (e.g. Muslim; or socialist) in the light of which the particularist ethnic identity becomes irrelevant. Here a central thesis of contemporary ethnicity research meets the post-structuralist philosophy of Derrida: the idea of the self as forming a unity onto its own, is only a myth.[67]

This raises the question as to the existence and nature of precolonial identities in Africa. In precolonial Africa a great diversity of languages, cultural customs, modes of production, systems of domination, and somatic traits could be discerned. Along each of these criss-crossing dimensions identities, in the sense of named categories, could be defined in local contexts. These categories often had a perspectival nature: one could speak of 'the northerners', 'the forest dwellers', 'those who seek to dissociate from the state', depending on the opposite position occupied by the speaker himself. But in other cases the designations derived from localised clans, which furthered the essentialist suggestion of a fixed, somatically anchored identity acquired by descent from a common ancestor. Precolonial states, such as occurred on a grand scale in Africa across several millennia, always displayed a plurality of languages, cultural

orientations, modes of production, somatic features, and besides the statal forms of domination they tended to loosely incorporate such local forms of authority (authority within kin groups, territorial groups, cults, guilds, gender organisations) as constituted alternatives to statehood. Not so much control over demarcated territories, but control over people (by means of course of law, violence, and tribute in the form of produce and people), was the central theme of these states. Therefore precolonial boundaries must be conceived of in terms of areas of overlapping of spheres of influence, and not as lines on a map.

It has been amply demonstrated that many colonial and precolonial ethnic designations in Africa have no roots in the precolonial past, and therefore must be very recent. The nomenclature of colonial and post-colonial identities in Africa derived *to a limited extent* from the extensive and complex repertoire of precolonial identities. However, it would be totally erroneous to claim (as African ethnic ideologues, Western journalists, and a declining number of researchers would do) that twentieth-century ethnicity in the African continent has merely been a continuation of precolonial patterns of group formation and group conflict. The above listed characteristics of twentieth-century ethnicity hardly occurred before the colonial state had established itself with its bureaucratic, named territorial divisions.

In the contemporary ideological construction of Africa, and in Africa, ethnicity is to a large extent thought as holistic and as bundled: language, cultural customs, modes of production, somatic features, territory, political leadership are then assume to form one integrated package in such a way that a person's ethnic identity (that person's 'culture') is claimed to determine the *total mode of being* of that person. *Such bundling is a direct reproduction of the bureaucratic rationality that forms the framework for the political in post-modern North Atlantic society.* The various cultural orientations involved in a local situation are hierarchically ordered, in such a way that one cultural orientation is privileged above the others, is essentialised, and is considered to be eminently constitutive for one person or for one group; this is the cultural orientation that is subsequently stressed as a result of public mediation. Thus 'culture' functions primarily as a performative boundary marker. By contrast, it was characteristic of precolonial identities that the various dimensions along which they could be defined remained detached from one another, were not mutually integrated, and as a result no single identity was capable of developing into a claim of totality that was publicly mediated. Instead the various identities within a region criss-crossed in a gaudy confusion.

All this allows us to understand why in their own personal vision of social life, many African have come to consider as an unshakeable reality the very tribal model that we as professional Africanists are rejecting today. Politicians can appeal to this reified and distorted image of social reality in order to lend an ethnic dimension to economic and political contradictions, thus essentialising these contradictions.

Given these historical and political backgrounds, it is difficult to offer a useful definition of ethnicity. However, the following is an attempt in that direction. Ethnicity is the way in which wider social processes have been economically, politically and culturally structured under reference to a plurality of ethnic groups that are distinguished and named within the collective space. A recognised ethnicity is not 'a culture', and a national or international political system is not an 'arena of cultures'. An ethnic group is nothing but an explicitly named set of people within a societal system of the classification and raking of groups. Within the social field (e.g. a society, a nation state) one collectively distinguishes a limited number of such named sets of people, always more than just one. Membership of such a set is considered to be acquired by birth and hence is in principle immutable, but in fact the acquisition of a specific ethnic identity later in life is a common occurrence. Invariably more than one identity is invested in one person at the same time. Within each set, people identify with one another, and are identified by others, on the grounds of a number of historically determined and historically mutable, specific ethnic boundary markers: the ethnic name itself, and moreover e.g. language, forms of leadership, modes of production, other distinctive cultural features, occasionally also somatic features. The ethnic groups that exist within one country often differ from each other only with respect to *a very limited selection of cultural features functioning as boundary markers.*

Concretely this means the following. From a Nkoya village in the heartland of Zambia one may trek (partly on the trail of David Livingstone 130 years ago) five hundred kilometres towards the north, east, west and south without noticing remarkable changes in the cultural, man-made landscape (the villages, the royal courts, the fields, the pastures, the fishing grounds, the hunting groups, shrines, but also ideas about kinship, law, witchcraft, adulthood, kingship, birth, maturation and dead, the world, life after death, God); on one's journey one traverses a large number of so-called 'tribal areas' and language areas such as used to be distinguished in the colonial period. And whereas most local inhabitants will turn out to be multilingual and while the languages of the Bantu linguistic family look alike like Dutch, German and Swedish, after a few hundred kilometres one can no longer effectively communicate using the Nkoya language — but this will only be the case hundreds of kilometres after one has effectively left behind the recognised 'Nkoya tribal area' as defined in colonial times.

The great regional continuity of cultural orientations, in western Zambia as elsewhere in Africa, is an empirical fact; in a process of essentialisation, ethnonyms and other aspects of ethnicisation have imposed deceptive boundaries upon this continuity — more or less in the way one sticks out nicely shaped cookies with a cookie mould, from a large rolled out slab of dough that has everywhere virtually the same constitution.

8.   *Beyond ethnography*

In my opinion, the contemporary anthropological discourse on African ethnicity,[68] cultural diversity and cultural continuity contains the best possible arguments for my thesis that 'cultures do not exist'; these are largely based on empirical ethnographic research. Therefore, let us stay a while with ethnography as a specific form of intercultural knowledge production.

The ethnographer situates her pronouncements in a social process, in the encounter and dialogue[69] between the ethnographer and the people she is writing about. This lends to ethnographic texts a character of their own, an anecdotal narrative accent that is often subversive vis-à-vis the quest for discursive appropriation, consistence, the imposition of sharp conceptual boundaries, and other similar types of ordering that tend to be characteristic of North Atlantic philosophical texts. Moreover, despite the great investment the cultural anthropologist has made towards mastering the local language, she does realise, as no other, that a large part of human manifestations is not framed in language and can hardly be expressed in language. Although ultimately anthropology is geared to the reduction of a large variety of human manifestations including non-language ones, to text, anthropology tends to the insight that language, although of unmistakable structuring potential, is not ultimately and totally determining, neither for the cultural domain, nor for the full range of human cognition.

Profoundly inherent to anthropology is a recognition of the performative side of human behaviour. In the anthropological discipline the concepts of 'role' and 'role play' have turned out to be eminently successful as devices to link the individual and the social. The anthropologists realise that man shapes his social mode of existence by playing a role, with a very great degree of personal interpretation on the part of the role player, by loosely interpreting a social script, and not by the mechanical acting out of a fully determined, tightly programmed cultural inscription. Moreover the entire idea of the acquisition of cultural competence by means of participant observation is based on the notion of play: to the best of her ability the fieldworker plays, not the role of foreign researcher (for that role scarcely exists as an *emic* concept in most social contexts world-wide), but a number of roles that are being recognised and defined within the local society (friend, guest, kinswoman, lover, patron, client), and she tries to bend these roles so that they are not merely locally recognisable, but also instrumental for the main goal of her local residence in the host society: for the collection of information.

Even although she will occasionally have great doubt on this point, both in the field and during writing up, the ethnographer in principle takes for granted her capability of getting to know, through prolonged participant interaction, one of more cultural orientations from the inside and in their specific systematics.

She also takes for granted that in this way she will ultimately be able to produce, by herself, forms of local public behaviour that the original participants will recognise as more or less competent according to the local model. In this production of local overt behaviour, which is increasingly competent (as it is constantly subjected to the participants' sanctions through their gaze, rejection, ridicule, encouragement) the local model is articulated and made manifest much more directly and unmistakably than in the most dextrous interviews. For the anthropologist, participation is not only a source of primary information through observations and interviews, and not just a means to lower thresholds of communication by generating trust and demonstrating humility. It is the constant practical test of whether the anthropologist can apply in practice the local knowledge which she has gained in interviews and observation.

In the context of anthropological fieldwork as a knowledge acquiring practice, the term 'participation' has a totally different meaning from that which philosophers derive from the work of the French ethnologist Lévy-Bruhl[70] — for many philosophers their principal source of a furtive conceptualisation of humanity outside the North Atlantic region. For Lévy-Bruhl, who worked in the first half of the twentieth century, participation was a specific form of incomplete, diffuse and porous subjectivity allegedly characterising so-called 'non-western' or — as one preferred to say then — 'primitive' man — a model of experience according to which the human subject does not juxtapose himself vis-à-vis the surrounding nature and society, but largely merges into them. By the same token, such juxtaposition was supposed to be characteristic of the logical rationality of the North Atlantic subject under the habitual conditions of modernity.

Anthropological participation in the context of fieldwork has a unique function of validation. Let us take as an example the learning of a foreign language though total immersion. Someone involved in such a process will produce speech acts, will submit these to native speakers for criticism and correction, and will thus gauge and improve his own skill in the local language. In the same (and overlapping) way participant observation furnishes a practical feedback to the implicit and explicit insights that a fieldworker may have gathered earlier in the same research through observation and conversations. Participating is in the first instance not an expression of exotism, not a form of going native or of risky loss of self, but simply an inductive and hence evidently incomplete form of empirical proof in practical, interactive and reflective form. If the fieldworker has actually arrived at some real knowledge and understanding of local cultural forms, then she is rewarded by the participants by the latter's affirmative attitude and by an increased flow of subsequent information; and in the opposite case she is punished by the participants' rejection and a decrease in the subsequent flow of information. The more the fieldworker is defenceless, the more devoid of North Atlantic hegemonic protection, the more isolated from her home background, the stronger the social

control that the participants can exert on her, and the more massive the flow of information and the greater, ultimately (provided the fieldworker can retain or re-gain her professional distance), the knowledge and insight gathered during fieldwork. The time-consuming and humble learning of a cultural orientation including at least one of the local languages (local settings nearly always involve more than one language simultaneously) characterises anthropology as a form of intercultural knowledge on feedback basis. Moreover, knowledge production in participatory fieldwork takes place on both verbal and non-verbal levels, leading to the ethnographer's textual renderings of the participants' own texts, as well as to the ethnographer's textual renderings of observations of non-verbal behaviour. Because of this much wider, non-verbal basis, firmly rooted in participation, the knowledge acquired in fieldwork derives from experience (often profound and distressing experience) in ways that have scarcely parallels in the procedures of intercultural knowledge production so far pioneered by intercultural philosophers; unless the latter do fieldwork among sages, but then their techniques of elicitation and recording are often hopelessly defective.

Therefore, whatever may be theoretically wrong with fieldwork as a method for the production of intercultural knowledge, it appears to be *in principle* far superior to the forms of intercultural knowledge of philosophers, who tend to rely on texts, and usually on translated texts from foreign languages at that; I say 'in principle', because below I shall argue that this empirical advantage is largely forfeited by the epistemological and philosophical naïvety of anthropologists as compared to professional philosophers.

The role of researcher forces the anthropologist to adopt distance and instrumentality vis-à-vis the participants and their cultural orientations, but at the same time the internalisation of local cultural orientations works in exactly the opposite direction. Ethnographic fieldwork is a constant play of seducing and being seduced. It constantly suggests the possibility of such a boundary-crossing as the fieldworker desires, and in this suggestion the boundary between researcher and the researched, far from being denied or perceived, is only *constructed* in the first place. The researcher seeks to be seduced towards participation and knowledge; but the hosts also, in their turn, seduce through word and gesture in order to constantly shift and reduce the boundaries of access, knowledge, trust and intimacy around which every anthropological fieldwork revolves.[71]

In playing the game of fieldwork, is the ethnographer the lover or beloved *par excellence* of the society under study — or the cynical manipulator; or both? This question has occasionally been asked within the anthropological discipline.[72] But it addresses the foundation of that discipline to such an extent that it cannot be answered from within the confines of anthropology itself. Of old, the investigation of foundations is shunned by anthropologists — complacently they are satisfied with their naïve empiricism.[73] Anthropologists manage to do their work in fieldwork locations that tend to be distant and

inhospitable, and here they think up Spartan alternatives for the standard North Atlantic comforts that are temporarily denied to them. By the same token they are inclined to improvise their way when it comes to epistemological and methodological foundations, thinking up their own solutions and, if they seek help in the process, to limit their search to the writings of fellow-anthropologists. But often this does not yield enough.

In view of the reputation (as being highly philosophical) of Johannes Fabian's seminal book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*,[74] I was surprised to see, upon a recent re-reading, that its explicit philosophical references are in fact practically limited to Baudrillard, Foucault, Hobbes, Ricoeur en Schutz.[75] Another explicitly philosophically-orientated book written by an anthropologist, that by Peter Kloos on the philosophy of anthropology,[76] deals with only an odd selection of philosophical problems in anthropology: the Popperian and logical positivist underpinning — not of fieldwork-based ethnography on one community (which is by far the most standard form of anthropological knowledge production) but with comparative anthropology (i.e. cross-cultural studies). Of fieldwork, mainly the ethical problems of fieldwork in unmistakably imperialist situations are treated. Even so, Fabian and Kloos display a philosophical competence that is absolutely exceptional among anthropologists in Dutch-language environments, with the exception of such (post-)Roman Catholic fortresses as Nijmegen and Louvain, full of (mainly ex-) priests and ex-students for the priesthood, whose standard stock-in-trade has been a decent two-years philosophical training. Characteristically, philosophy has not been part of the secondary school curriculum in the Netherlands; although this situation is about to change. In French, German and American cultural anthropology incidental reference to contemporary philosophy is rather more usual and is beginning to become fashionable; but even there it is very rare to find specific studies exploring the relationship between both disciplines.[77]

Used to roughing it under fieldwork conditions, anthropologists hate to thrown away something that may yet come in handy. At the present moment, when philosophy has virtually turned away from the concept of the subject and from body/mind dualism as two major pillars of modernity, we witness how the subject, acting consciously and constructing his world on that basis, settles comfortably as the central point of departure of mainstream anthropology — where transactionalist actor approaches on the basis of methodological individualism have been popular since the 1960s; since the end of the 1980s this paradigm has gained massive political support in that the concept of the market as a maximalising strategy has become the ideological keynote of North Atlantic society. At the present moment when post-structuralist approaches, with considerable delay, seep into anthropology, the structuralist method for the analysis of myths and rites turns out, nonetheless, to have installed itself among the standard professional analytical tool kit of the anthropologist. In the same

vein, neo-Marxism as an all-encompassing anthropological paradigm of the 1970s has by far been left behind today, but what has remained, also as part of the lasting tool kit of the anthropologist, is the model of the articulation of modes of production, that could not have been formulated but for Marx's work on the Asiatic mode of production and on other non-Western societies. Used to dissimulate the contradictions of intercultural mediation or to encapsulate these contradictions in what would appear to be personal eccentricities (cf. my own *sangoma*hood as discussed below) rather than to think them through in general analytical terms, anthropologists evidently do not aspire to systematic consistency. In practice they are arch-eclectics.

Philosophers are infinitely more sophisticated on these points. From their self-image composed of intellectual passion, broad intellectual exchange, interdisciplinarity, and their intimate knowledge of the intellectual genealogies of concepts and schools of thought, they can scarcely imagine the specific dynamics of cultural anthropology as an international discipline, where yet the echoes of the wider intellectual climate of our time are heard only with great retardation, at the cost of considerable intra-discipinary resistance, and often deformed beyond recognition. For instance, the Nietzschean distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian was appropriated by Ruth Benedict in her popular introductory work *Patterns of Culture*, half a century later.[78] The critique of anthropology for being imperialist (early 1970s) arose in the aftermath of the anti-imperialism permeating the left-wing intellectual and philosophical climate in continental Europe during the 1950s and 1960s. Likewise, we have seen the rise of post-structuralist and post-modern anthropology, a few decades after this was the intellectual fashion in architecture, literature and philosophy. A nice example of oblique anthropological philosophising is also the book *Culture and Practical Reason* by Marshall Sahlins, who for years was leader of one of the world's most renowned departments of anthropology, that at the University of Chicago.[79] For any philosopher Sahlins' title would in the first refer place to Kant;[80] however, Sahlins' approach has nothing whatsoever to do with Kant, there is a deliberate non-reference.[81]

Only once or twice did anthropology manage to take the initiative in the definition of the wider intellectual climate — notably in the rise of the concept of 'culture', and in Lévi-Strauss' version of structuralism (which however, as is generally known, was amply prepared for by linguistic, sociological and psychoanalytic developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century). Hardly any traces can be fond today of what was Wittgenstein's gift to anthropology: the promising discussion, as from the late 1950s, of rationality, magic, and the recognition of the truth problem such as it is posed by the belief systems of different cultural orientations than one's own.[82] Selected anthropologists did realise that the phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches in philosophy are extraordinarily suitable for the problematisation of the cultural practices of others both within and outside one's own society;

however, once these approaches have been introduced into anthropology (by Geertz, among others) they have been localised and canonised there, and hardly any anthropologist still reaches for the original phenomenological texts. In Geertz' approach the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' description corresponds with that between *emic* and *etic*. Geertz has rendered anthropology a not altogether indubious service by adapting Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics to what Geertz thought were the requirements of ethnography.[83] It amounted to a major *coup de force*: notably, the decision to consider as *texts* all the pluriform events — including non-language ones — that lend themselves to ethnographic description. A quarter of a century later — under the influence of the further elaboration of textual theories in literature science — this conception has led, among a minority of anthropologists, to a hermetic view of the ethnographic corpus as complete, introverted, and as detached from the dynamics of social relationships in the social domain that is situated around that corpus and to which that corpus refers in important ways.[84]

If phenomenology only found its way into anthropology at considerable costs and with considerable delay, the development of an anthropological discourse based on Foucault is today — one and a half decade after Foucault's death — becoming a respectable anthropological pastime.[85] The anthropological reception of Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari is still in its infancy.

Post-modernism only reached anthropology by the late 1980s.[86] Never has there been so much discussion of modernity in anthropology as in the last few years, often in terms of modernity being a condition that, although still highly coveted among our African subjects of inquiry, is already passed, has already lost its magical appeal, has already been overtaken by post-modernity, among North Atlantic anthropologists themselves in their personal lives as well as in their writings. This does not take away the fact that the majority of anthropologists have tacitly taken a curious position in the debate on modernity and post-modernity. For the ethnographer is on the one hand — the post-modern aspect — the champion of the specific, the local, and the vernacular (the *emic* side); but this often serves as merely a stepping-stone towards something else: towards an attempt to search — and this is the typically modernist aspect of the ethnographic practice — in the local for subsequent generalisations that transcend the local context. This search is informed by the construction of the publishable ethnographic text, and by the general anthropological concepts and theories that feature in such a text as a wider framework (the *etic* side). In this way the specific, local and vernacular is on the one hand — after post-modern fashion — claimed to be 'other' in a unique way that does not allow a relative view; but on the other hand that very same local aspect is — after modernist fashion — dragged along to a dialectics that subsumes that otherness as part of a larger whole, a no-longer-other, an Other reduced to sameness. The anthropologist balances between modernity and post-modernity, in an inimitable

circus act that philosophers can very well deconstruct but that they would scarcely feel tempted to emulate.

An important factor in the relative intellectual isolation of the anthropological discipline has been the fact that that discipline has also attracted a remarkable number of outsiders: Jews, women, homosexuals, working-class children like myself, migrants, and moreover the spiritual heirs of the explorers, big-game hunters and missionaries of the nineteenth century, — so many people who were less welcome in the more established academic disciplines, or who could not take root there. Moreover we can point to a process of professionalisation that has persisted throughout the twentieth century and that brought about the tendency for anthropologists and other social scientists to preferably dissociate themselves from, and antagonise, the very fields of scholarship with which they would have the greatest affinity in terms of problematic and method: philosophical anthropology, history, classics, comparative legal studies, comparative religious studies, linguistics. Instead anthropologists and their fellow social scientists sought counsel with the natural sciences and the latter methodologies and epistemologies. As a result a superficial scientism is often the only, obsolete, philosophical baggage of anthropologists. Besides, many anthropologists combine a rigid orientation towards societies outside the North Atlantic with myopia, not to say contempt, vis-à-vis the social, political and intellectual current events taking place in their own social, political, and academic surroundings beyond anthropology proper.

For decades the distinction between *emic* and *etic* has been one of the most powerful tools among cultural anthropologists in order to define and to approach their knowledge object and the procedures of their knowledge construction. A few years ago the leading logician Quine gave his philosophical *nihil obstat* to the paired concepts.[87] Yet the distinction, however useful, may easily be criticised. It is cast in the form of a binary opposition, which also provides the standard framework for Levi-Strauss' structuralism, and whose implausibility as a basic unit of culture has been argued in that context. Bhabha demonstrates (in a way inspired by Derrida's deconstruction of binary oppositions) that colonial practice took shape, not so much by virtue of the binary oppositions that were imposed by the colonial rulers, but by the fuzzy, inconsistent ways in which these binary oppositions were in fact applied.[88] The distinction moreover posits a modernist juxtaposition between knowing subject (the ethnographer) and known object (the participants, their conscious cultural orientation, and beyond that the underlying postulated reality as reconstructed by the ethnographer). Thus the distinction raises fundamental political and ethical questions concerning the subordinating, even dehumanising nature of the Other's analytical (*etic*) gaze.[89] Our judgement of the distinction cannot be detached from the debate concerning the controversial claim[90] of access to a privileged meta-position where an analyst (e.g. the ethnographer) pretends to escape from her own social and cultural determination, as well as from the

intercontinental hegemonic structures of domination. Here we had better remind ourselves that what we intend as *etic* (as analytical, as meta-cultural) in all probability merely amounts to our own local *emic* raised to an undeserved status of universality and cultural neutrality. Notably, the *etic* perspective is opposed to a dialogical, intersubjective (in the sense of: between fieldworker and local participants), *emic* perspective of knowledge production, such as is being preferred today. On the other hand the *etic* approach is in line with another and equally cherished ideal of knowledge production: it is boundary-effacing in this respect that it allows us (not only the ethnographer and the international academic community, bit also the local bearers of the cultural orientation under study) to liberate ourselves from the chains of collective positions that have once been adopted and that are being mediated by the *emic* approach.[91] In other words, to the extent to which the *emic* approach mediates the collective representations of others, to that extent the *etic* approach may be said to liberate us from such (inevitably parochial, local, particularistic) collective representations, thus opening up space for our own properly scientific explorations, that tend to universality and should strive to be as free as possible from local collective representations including our own. Moreover the *etic* approach reminds us of the unintended and un-predicted effects of socio-cultural arrangements — social implications of which the actors cannot possibly be conscious and which therefore cannot be approached from an *emic* perspective.[92] Because of its distancing from the local cultural specificity to which only the fieldworker herself has scientific access, it is precisely the *etic* perspective that promises to provide a solution with regard to the intradisciplinary intersubjectivity in intercultural knowledge production. All in all the distinction *emic/etic* clearly brings out the fundamental dilemmas of cultural anthropology today.

Despite the relative intellectual isolation of anthropology, we can identify in the wider philosophical climate of our time a number of developments that have greatly undermined classic anthropology in the 1970s-80s. The rise of an explicit discourse on alterity, in feminism, anti-colonialism and anti-racism, inevitably had a negative effect on the credibility of he anthropological project as 'the science of the other, of other cultures'. Johannes Fabian's book *Time and the Other* has been a major factor in introducing these themes into anthropology.[93] This movement converged with that of post-modernism, that proclaimed the end of all Grand Narratives, thus debunking Grand Theory as a totalitarian illusion.[94] Was not the Grand Narrative a strategy, not of revealing the truth, but of concealing it? Was not the great narrative of anthropology a way of speaking, not even about the other, but about ourselves as participants, partisans, in a process of North Atlantic hegemonic intellectual and ideological subjugation of the world at large? The anti-imperialist critics of anthropology in the 1970s (Asad, Copans, Said)[95] were still following a Marxist inspiration, but the post-colonial theory approach by such writers as Spivak and Rattansi[96]

reveals the potential also of post-structuralism/ philosophy of difference for bringing out the problems of knowledge production on an intercontinental scale — notwithstanding the North Atlantic entrenchment of most post-structuralist philosophers themselves.

In the course of the last few decades this type of critique has demonstrated that cultural anthropology is so profoundly formed and informed by North Atlantic projects of domination (colonialism, imperialism, world-wide hegemony) that we can scarcely believe any more that this discipline could take a distance from these antecedents without giving up her disciplinary identity. The inequality between the ethnographer and the group under study in terms of control over the central medium ('participant observation' and 'a textual ethnography') takes care of the fact that, even with the best of intentions, deformations of representation are bound to occur. Since the production of text is ultimately a technology of human control, even the best *emic* representations are bond to be misused for intellectual domination. The ethnographer has an unshakeable belief that it is possible to adequately report on the knowledge acquired during fieldwork, even if this means reporting in a language that in principle is totally different from the one used in the original ethnographic context and therefore far more accessible to the participants than the formal academic language of professional ethnography. Ethnographers (including those ethnographers who call themselves intercultural philosophers) can only claim credibility provided in their fieldwork and in the production of their published texts, ample provision[97] has been made to turn their ethnography into a form of 'communicative action'.[98] This requires not only that (along *emic* lines) the participants' representations and evaluations are, to the ethnographer's personal conviction, mediated faithfully and with integrity, but also *that the participants have a* decisive *say in this process of mediation*. Only on that basis can ethnographic mediation become a form of self-reflexive taking-consciousness that is in line with the participants' own local cultural orientation,[99] and that enables the underlying epistemological principles of that orientation to effectively fertilise, or transcend, North Atlantic empirical epistemology.

9.   *From ethnography to intercultural philosophy: Beyond the ethnographic epistemology*

We are in need of an academic medium that clearly does not have such hegemonic roots as cultural anthropology; and of practitioners of that medium who, because of their background or their radical reorientation later in life, do not take part in that hegemonic process,[100] or seek to disentangle themselves from it. Intercultural philosophy is a discipline attracting intellectuals from outside the North Atlantic. To some extent, African philosophy is even reserved to Africans. Many intercultural and African philosophers conduct — often in a strongly introspective manner — ethnography on the spur of their own

knowledge and understanding of one of their cultural orientations (that of their home village, kinship, village ritual), against the background of their command both of their mother tongue and of an international language and idiom of academic communication. Obviously, such researchers are greatly privileged as compared to foreign ethnographers. However, even these philosophers are involved in a process of mediation that springs from the fact that, among their various cultural orientations, the cultural orientation called 'cosmopolitan philosophy' plays a very important role. In this situation there is a real danger of nostalgic and performative projections on their part; explicit empirical methods strengthening intra-disciplinary intersubjectivity are absolutely indispensable here. A profound awareness of the great challenges on this point distinguishes such cosmopolitan African philosophers as Mudimbe[101] and Appiah from their essentialising predecessors of an earlier generation.

The main issue here is not a Northern hereditary burden allegedly preventing Northerners from producing valid intercultural knowledge about the South, nor a Southern birth-right to a monopoly on valid knowledge production about the South, but a radical revolution in our approach to the cultural other. To the extent to which cultural anthropology has entrenched itself in the posed naïveté of an eclectic, apolitical, but fundamentally Eurocentric empiricism, it is only intercultural philosophy that may open our eyes to the epistemological implications of cultural anthropology.

In cultural anthropology statements of certain types are eligible to be assessed as true or false:

- the ethnographer's statement to the effect that her ethnographic description of concrete *emic* details is valid
- the ethnographer's statement to the effect that her abstract theoretical, *etic* analysis is valid
- the individual informants' statements that they render facts, representations and rules validly.

There is however a fourth type of statement that cultural anthropologists absolutely exclude from the question concerning truth:

- the participants' statements to the effect that their collective representations are a valid description of reality (both in its sensory and in its meta-sensory aspect, visible and invisible etc.)[102]

Following the later Wittgenstein, Winch has shown us that the truth of the latter type of statement cannot be established in general and universally, but depends on the language-specific, meaning-defining form of life that is at hand. Whether in a certain society witches do or do not exist, cannot be answered with any universal statement to the effect that witches do exist, or do not exist, but can

only be answered by reference to the specific forms of life at hand in that society — and of such forms of life there are always more than one at the same time and place.[103] The concept of form of life has much in common with my concept of 'cultural orientation' (of which likewise more than one are involved in any society at the same time). Now, cultural relativism as a central professional point of departure of classic anthropology may perhaps imply, theoretically, that the exclusion of this fourth category originates in respect for whatever is true in the other form of life or cultural orientation; but in practice it nearly always comes down to following. However much the ethnographer has invested in the acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge so that local collective representations can be unsealed for her, and however much she gradually internalises these collective representations as a private person — yet in her professional formal utterances (in the form of academic ethnographic writing-up) she does not give the collective representations she has studied the benefit of the doubt, nor the respect she pretends to be due to the collectively other. The tacit point of departure of the cultural anthropological professional practice (and in this respect it does not distance itself from North Atlantic society as a whole) is: Collective representations of other societies under study cannot be true, unless they coincide one hundred percent with the collective representations of the researcher's own society of origin. Of course, both the researcher's society of origin and the cultural orientation under study construct, each in their turn and in a highly different way, a truth-creating life world in the form of a texture of collective representations. This is a situation suggestive of a relativist approach in so far as it would *per definition* be impossible for us to choose between these truths on the basis of an *emic* perspective. *But according to the conventions of ethnography such a life world is to be one-sidedly broken down if it is the Other's life world, and must be left intact if it is the researcher's own.* Just try to realise what this means for the confrontation, throughout the modern world, in institutional, political and media settings, between such major and powerful North Atlantic institutional complexes as democracy, medicine, education, Christianity, and pre-existing local alternatives in the respective fields. The anthropologist may pay lip service to these local alternatives for humanitarian and aesthetic reasons but — for her own sanity and professional survival (not as a impassioned researcher but as a permanent member of her own home society) she has to abide by the adage that they cannot be true.[104]

Born in the Netherlands (1947), I was trained at the university of my home town as an anthropologist specialising in religion. From my first fieldwork (1968), when I investigated saint worship and the ecstatic cult in rural North Africa, I have struggled with this problem of the fourth type of truth — that I am inclined to consider as the central problem of interculturality. With gusto I sacrificed to the dead saints in their graves, danced along with the ecstatic dancers, experienced the beginning of mystical ecstasy myself, built an entire network of fictive kinsmen around me. Yet in my ethnography I reduced the

very same people to numerical values in a quantitative analysis, and I knew of no better way to describe their religious representations than as the denial of North Atlantic or cosmopolitan natural science.[105] It was only twenty years later when, in the form of a novel (*Een Buik Openen*, i.e. *Opening a Belly*, published in 1988)[106] I found the words to testify to my love for and indulgence in the North African forms of life that I had had to keep at a distance as an ethnographer and as a member of North Atlantic society; and my two-volume, English-language book manuscript on this research is still lying idly on a shelf. In the course of many years and of four subsequent African fieldwork locations, always operating in the religious and the therapeutic domain, I gradually began to realise that I loathed the cynical professional attitude of anthropology, and that I had increasing difficulty sustaining that attitude. My apprenticeship at the University of Zambia (1971-1974) as a young lecturer and researcher in social science in very close collaboration with such radical scholars as Jack Simons and Jaap van Velsen, in an intellectual climate consistently and incessantly preparing for the democratic liberation of South Africa (in which struggle Jack Simons and his life's companion Ray Alexander played a major part), reinforced the radical lessons I had received from the Asianist Wim Wertheim as a student. As a result I began to shed the blunt positivism that had attended my first fieldwork. I became aware of scholarship's political and ethical responsibilities, and of the potential humiliation and betrayal of the people under study by social researchers in the field. In subsequent years, I was to ask myself more and more the following question: *Who was I that I could afford to make-believe, to pretend, on those points that attracted the undivided serious commitment of my research participants was involved?* Several among them have played a decisive role in my life, as role models, teachers, spiritual masters, loved ones. Experiencing their religion and ritual as an idiom (a symbolic technology) of sociability, I could not forever bear the tension of joining them in the field and betraying them outside the field.

In Guinea-Bissau, in 1983, I did not remain the observer of the oracular priests I had come to study, but I became their patient — like nearly all the born members of the local society were. In the town of Francistown, Botswana, from 1988, under circumstances that I have discussed elsewhere[107] — the usual form of fieldwork became so insupportable to me that I had to throw overboard all professional considerations. I became not only the patient of local diviner-priests (*sangoma*s), but at the end of a long therapy course ended up as one of them, and thus as a socially recognised and certified believer in the local collective representations. At the time I primarily justified this as a political deed, from me as a White man in a part of Africa (Botswana's North East District) that had been disrupted by White monopoly capitalism and White racism. Now more than then I realise that it was also and primarily an epistemological position-taking — a revolt against the professional hypocrisy in which the hegemonic perspective of anthropology reveals itself. It was a

position-taking that almost expelled me from cultural anthropology and that created the conditions for the step which I finally made when occupying my present chair in intercultural philosophy.

This step means a liberation, not only from an empirical habitus that, along with existential distress, has also yielded me plenty of intellectual delight, adventure, remuneration, and honours; but also liberation from such far-reaching spiritual dependence from my mentors and fellow cult members as originally characterised my *sangoma*hood. Becoming a *sangoma* was a concrete, practical deed of transgression in answer to the contradictions of a practice of intercultural knowledge production that I had engaged in for decades, with increasing experience and success. Becoming an intercultural philosopher means a further step: one that amounts to integrating that transgressive deed in a systematic, reflective and intersubjective framework, in order to augment the anecdoctal, autobiographical 'just so' account with theoretical analysis, and to explore the social relevance of an individual experience. For what is at stake here is not merely an autobiographical anecdote. If I struggled with intercultural knowledge production, then my problem coincides with that of the modern world as a whole, where intercultural knowledge production constitutes one of the two or three greatest challenges. If it is possible for me to be at the same time a Botswana *sangoma*, a Dutch professor, husband and father, and an adoptive member of a Zambian royal family, while at the same time burdened by sacrificial obligations, cultural affinities and fictive kin relationships from North and West Africa, then this does not just say something about me (a me that is tormented, post-modern, boundless, one who has lost his original home but after finding, and losing again, new physical and spiritual homes in Africa realises that the construction of homes is as arbitrary and full of risks as it is indispensible and universal among humans, even if one may ultimately find a relatively secure home with one's loved ones and in one's professional practices. Provided we take the appropriate distance and apply the appropriate analytical tools, it also says something about whatever 'culture' is and what it is not. It implies that culture is not bounded, not tied to a place, not unique but multiple, not impossible to combine, blend and transgress, not tied to a human body, an ethnic group, a birth right. And it suggests that ultimately we are much better of as nomads between a plurality of cultures, than as self-imposed prisoners of a smug Eurocentrism (or Afrocentrism, for that matter).

10.   *From ethnography to intercultural philosophy: comprehensive correspondences in space and time*

In the 1990s my road from ethnographer to intercultural philosopher would take me to a further exploration of the relativity of cultural specificity (hence by implication the deconstruction of cultural relativism). Once I has become a *sangoma*, I had at my disposal a fairly unique body of cultural knowledge, and a

fairly unique status — the status of recognised local religious specialist — but my move to become a diviner-priest-therapist would be rendered meaningless if as a next step I would merely commit this knowledge to writing in a standard ethnographic monograph, with all the distancing and subordinating objectification this entails. Neither could I bring myself to write about the details of the social and psychiatric case material that automatically came my way as the therapist of my Botswana patients. What to do? Could I find a perspective from which my transcultural stance could yet be combined with a recognisable professional form of scientific knowledge production?

I had now in my possession these mysterious rough wooden tablets of the *sangoma* oracle, consecrated in the blood of my sacrificial goats and periodically revived by the application of the fat of these animals and by immersion in water of a year's first rain. I could throw these tablets, and interpret the sixteen different combinations they could assume in terms of an elaborate interpretative catalogue that I had gradually learned during my training as a *sangoma*; the interpretation would yield me knowledge of the ancestors' wishes, messages and grudges, would reveal a patient's life history to me, as well as his current illness and venues for cure and redress. The tablets seemed to represent the epitome of strictly local cultural particularism. It was as if they had risen from the village soil of Southern Africa at some indefinite Primordial Age, and the same seemed to apply to the interpretation scheme that names the sixteen specific combinations which may be formed by the tablets when these are ritually cast. The local oracle of four tablets had been described by missionaries as long ago as four hundred years.[108] 'The old woman like a stone', 'the old male witch like an axe', 'itching pubic hair like a young woman's', 'the uvula like a youthful penis' — this is how the four tablets are locally circumscribed, and their various combinations have connotations of witchcraft, ancestors, taboos, sacrificial dances, and all varieties of local animal totems. What could be more authentic and more African? Not for nothing had I, at the time, described my initiation (which, after more than twenty years of work as a religious and medical anthropologist, made me an accomplished and recognised specialist in an African divination and therapy system) as 'the end point of a quest to the heart of Africa's symbolic culture'.[109]

However, the illusion of immense local authenticity would soon blow up in my face. Soon I had to admit that this romantic suggestion of extreme locality was mere wishful thinking, under which lurked a reality that had enormous consequences for my theoretical and existential stance as an ethnographer and a world citizen. The interpretational scheme, right up to the nomenclature of the sixteen combinations, turned out to be an adaptation of tenth-century (CE) Arabian magic, with a Chinese iconography (consisting, just like in *I Ching*,[110] out of configurations of whole and broken lines), and at the same time astrological implication such as had been elaborated another fifteen or twenty centuries earlier, in Babylonia. The local cultural orientation in which the

inhabitants of Francistown had entrenched themselves, and from which I initially felt painfully excluded, turned out not to be at all the incarnation of absolute and unbridgeable otherness, but — just like my own cultural orientation as a North Atlantic scholar — a distant offshoot of the civilisations of the Ancient Near East, and like my own branch of science it turned out to have been effectively fertilised by an earlier offshoot from the same stem: the Arabian civilisation.[111] *I had struggled with the other, as if it were an unassailable, utterly alien totality; but parts of it turned out, on second thoughts, to be familiar and kindred, and available for appropriation.*

Clearly, such a position smacks of the denial of difference in favour of an imposed claim of sameness, and was destined to make me impopular among the small group of intercultural philosophers for reasons discussed above (section 3.4). But at the time anthropologists still constituted my main frame of reference. And among them, the insights derived from my *sangoma*divination study have led to a head-on collision[112] with the central theory of classic cultural anthropology since the 1930s: the historical and cultural specificity of distinct, for instance African, societies, the assumption of their being closed onto themselves and bounded, of their having a unique internal integration and systematics, in general the idea that something like 'a culture' exists, and the absence, or irrelevance, of comprehensive cultural connections in time and space.

This insight was for me the trigger to start a comprehensive research project, which has meanwhile resulted, among other publications, in an edited collection *Black Athena: Ten Years After* (1997; now being reprinted as *Black Athena Alive*), on the work of Martin Bernal; a book manuscript entitled *Global Bee Flight: Sub-Saharan Africa, Ancient Egypt and the World: Beyond the Black Athena Thesis*; and another book manuscript entitled *Cupmarks, Stellar Maps, and Mankala Board-Games: An Archaeoastronomical and Africanist Excursion into Palaeolithic World-views* — all in the final stages of preparation for publication.

Global Bee Flight is based on a similar *Through the Looking-Glass* (Lewis Carroll)[113] experience as I had in connection with the Francistown divination system. A few years ago I went through my various articles on western Zambian kingship in order to collect these in a single volume. This was shortly after I has spent a year at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) in 1994-95, as the only anthropological member of the Working Group on 'Magic and religion in the Ancient Near East'. After this extensive exposure my eye was suddenly and unexpectedly caught by the many specific and profound parallels between the ceremonies and mythologies surrounding Nkoya kingship in South Central Africa, and Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and South Asia. The parallels were so striking, so detailed, that I had to seriously consider the possibility of cultural diffusion between these various regions and South

Central Africa — once again the suggestion of continuities in space and time across thousands of kilometres and across several millennia.

The Francistown divination system and Nkoya kingship are two concrete examples of the kind of serendipities — totally unexpected finds — of cultural convergence and diffusion across the entire Old World, that have occupied a central place in my empirical research since 1990. But there is also a more systematic source of inspiration: the anthropological fieldwork that I have undertaken over the past thirty-odd years in various locations on the African continent. In some of these African settings I have been treated more as a stranger than in others, but I have always felt to be on fundamentally familiar grounds in Africa, in human life worlds I could readily explore, understand (their languages were quickly picked up), love and even anticipate, full of situations that reverberated deep-seated affinities, instead of in alien and exotic abodes of exile that made no sense to me and left me a total stranger.[114] In combination with the scholarly literature, with discussions with my colleagues, and with my involvement in the work of my Leiden colleagues and of my research students, these researches have created a context for comparative hypotheses suggesting considerable correspondences between local cultural orientations, far beyond the strictly local and presentist horizons of classic ethnography — far beyond 'cultures'...

11. *Against Eurocentrism*

Against this background I immediately recognised a kindred spirit in Martin Bernal, the author of the multi-volume book *Black Athena*: *The AfroasiAtic Roots of Classic Civilization*.[115]

Bernal intends to expose the Eurocentrism that — as he demonstrates — has been at the roots of the North Atlantic study of Graeco-Roman Antiquity over the past two centuries. In Bernal's opinion, the widespread idea of being heirs to the genius of Greek civilisation, allegedly without roots in any previous non-European civilisation, has played a major role in the justification of European intercontinental imperialism. His central thesis is that we must recognise the African and Asiatic roots of classical Greek civilisation (especially of its language, philosophy and religion) — and in doing so, we would also recognise the non-European roots of major cultural orientations in today's North Atlantic civilisation, that is increasingly becoming global anyway. Hence the pragmatic title of Bernal's *magnum opus*, *Black Athena*: this title is to indicate that the goddess Athena, although the central symbol of classical Greek civilisation, yet had an origin outside Europe, in Africa. The question is not without interest for philosophers for the principal stake in the *Black Athena* debate is the claim concerning the non-European origin of the European philosophical tradition.[116]

With *Black Athena: Ten Years After* (1997)[117] I reopened the debate on Bernal's work, that appeared to be effectively closed after the devastatingly critical *Black Athena Revisited*.[118] With the new book, *Global Bee Flight,* I return to Africa in order to investigate the implication of the *Black Athena* thesis for our Africa research today — and the implication of our Africa research for the *Black Athena* thesis. Because Ancient Egypt occupies a key position in the debates on Africa's cultural historical relation to Europe and to the rest of the world, a large section of *Global Bee Flight* is occupied by an analysis of the mutual interpenetration of Ancient Egyptian and sub-Sahara-African themes, in the way of concepts and structures of thought, myths, symbolism, the kingship, state formation, and productive practices. One absolutely surprising outcome of the book (when I started out I sincerely thought I could prove the opposite to be true!) is my confirmation, without the slightest reservation, of one of the most ridiculed ideas of early twentieth century anthropological diffusionism: Egyptocentrism as a possible model for African cultural history. By the end of the fourth millennium before the common era, Ancient Egypt owed its emergence as a civilisation (contrary to what Bernal thinks to be the case) to the interaction between Black African and Eastern Mediterranean / West Asian cultural orientations. But in the next step my analyses demonstrates that Ancient Egypt, in its turn, did have a decisive fertilising effect not only (as stressed in the *Black Athena* thesis) on the eastern Mediterranean basin and hence on Europe, but also, in a most significant feed-back process, on Black Africa, right into the nooks and crannies of many aspects of life, including the kingship, law, ritual and mythology. Instead of the patchwork-quilt blanket of mutually absolutely distinct 'cultures', as in the dominant view both among scholars and in the modern world at large, what thus emerges in the image of Africa that displays a very remarkable cultural unity. And such unity springs, not from any timeless and somatically-based Black mystique of Africanity, but from clearly detectable historical processes: having first served as *a* (not: *the*) major source and subsequently as principal recipient of Ancient Egyptian civilisation, and finally as the recipient of converging Arabian/ Islamic as well as — in the most recent centuries — North Atlantic colonial influences. The general conclusion of *Global Bee Flight* is a radical, positive and (coming from what looks like a White establishment scholar) unexpected revision of our conception of the place of Africa in global cultural history. Meanwhile there is little reason why the same model of qualified continuity over large distances in space and time would not also apply to other continents including Europe, and to the historical connections between various continents.

I have given reasons why (as an apparent reduction of difference to sameness) the argument of the convergence of African cultures (one of the tenets of the recent Afrocentrist movement, and a constant idea in Black consciousness for two centuries) is shunned by post-structuralist intercultural philosophers, but it is strange that this idea of convergence has met with so little

acceptance on the part of African philosophers today. Instead they virtually unanimously support the argument of cultural diversity. For instance, with Mudimbe,[119] Appiah shares the condition of being a leading philosopher who, while having been born in Africa, has resisted the temptation to identify with the production of a parochial form of African philosophy and instead produces a cosmopolitan, mainstream brand of thought that is eminently acceptable to most North Atlantic academic audiences, not in the least because it shuns all Afrocentrism and in general takes a reserved, deconstructivist attitude towards any African identity discourse. With reference to the work of the Senegalese natural scientist and cultural philosopher Cheikh Anta Diop, more than with reference to Bernal's work (which however he does not like any more than he does Diop's),[120] Appiah rejects the idea of any cultural continuity permeating the African continent today. For this he adduces not the fruits of any independent historical research of his own, but two self-evidences that however are untenable in the light of recent historical research: the claim that Ancient Egypt had only a non-specialised, vaguely articulated philosophy that moreover is unrelated, in substance, with current African cultural orientations; and the claim that we cannot expect to find, in Africa, cultural continuities extending over a period of three or more millennia.[121] In Appiah's words:

'If we could have traveled through Africa's many cultures in (...) [precolonial times] from the small groups of Bushman hunter-gatherers, with their stone-age materials, to the Hausa kingdoms, rich in worked metal — we should have felt in every place profoundly different impulses, ideas, and forms of life. To speak of an African identity in the nineteenth century — if an identity is a coalescence of mutually responsive (if sometimes conflicting) modes of conduct, habits of thought, and patterns of evaluation; in short, a coherent kind of human social psychology — would have been ''to give to aery nothing a local habitation and a name.'' '[122]

In line with this stress on precolonial fragmentation lies the African philosopher's Kaphagawani's thesis on 'C^4', which is a scientistic formula (cf. C^{14}, the carbon isotope so vital to historical dating) meant to express 'the Contemporary Confluence of Cultures on the Continent of Africa. This is a postcolonial phenomenon where different cultures meet and mingle to form new, hybrid forms'.[123]

In this formulation the emphasis on a plurality of mutually distinct and bounded cultures does give way to a recognition of greater unity, but extreme multiplicity and fragmentation is still held to be the hallmark of the African past, the point of departure. Such unity between African cultures as is being recognised is taken to be the result of the post-colonial phenomenon of globalisation, which allows this view to salvage the concept of a pristine distinctness of a great number of precolonial cultures in Africa. The entire discussion on Afrocentrism (with its Senegalese precursor Cheikh Anta Diop) appears to be lost on the majority of contemporary African philosophers.[124]

Afrocentrists like Molefi Kete Asante[125] are scarcely welcomed or cited in the circles of academic African philosophers.

12.   *To intercultural philosophy as a medium*

What then could be the contours of an intercultural philosophy that allows itself to be inspired by empirical research, but that essentially renews and transcends such research?

    The dialogue is not only one of the oldest philosophical genres, it is also a form of communication that has established itself in the modern, and especially the post-modern, world as the most ideal form: with assumptions of equal contributions from both sides, equal initiative, equal rights, for the participants in the dialogue. One tends to assume that, from a pluralistic perspective, the dialogue offers the best possible conditions for revealing the relevant aspects of a matter, perhaps even revealing truth itself. The word dialogue is often mentioned in the same breath as the word intercultural.[126] Also in my own work I have repeatedly been occupied with the dialogue as a therapeutic instrument for the illumination of personal and group problems and for the attainment of reconciliation, as a principal African social technology.[127] Whoever seeks dialogue is not satisfied with the mechanical, cold juxtaposition of difference; agreeing to disagree, to differ, is a sign, not of dialogue, but of the incapability of arriving at dialogue. The dynamics of dialogue always consist in making contradictions visible, then exploring the conditions under which these contradictions may be transcended in the direction of a new point of view that was not yet available from the very first but that emerges creatively from the very dialogue itself. The true dialogue is a form of implicit reconciliation.

    The anthropologist Michael Jackson (not to be confused with the once popular singer of that name) is one of the contemporary ethnographers who displays great sensitivity for problems of intercultural philosophy. His inspiration is primarily with Sartre's existentialist philosophy, and with Merleau-Ponty. With his work Jackson seeks to create a dialogue between people of various cultural orientations:

> 'But while my interest lies in the kind of metacultural understanding that Sartre and Merleau-Ponty sought, this should not be construed as a search for the essence of human Being but for ways of opening up dialogue between people from different cultures or traditions, way of bringing into being modes of understanding that effectively go beyond the intellectual conventions and political ideologies that circumscribe us all'.[128]

Jackson's ethnographic interlocutors do not speak for themselves; Jackson conducts the conversation in his book, and in a form that is not compellingly

imposed neither by the people under study, nor by Jackson's professional habitus as an anthropologist within the North Atlantic society.

In which cultural orientation does the ethnographer in fact find herself when she makes pronouncements about the cultural orientation under study: in an African orientation, a North Atlantic one, in both, or in *neither*? One school of anthropology in which this question has been at the centre of reflection has been the Louvain school, created in the 1980s by René Devisch (one of the people to whom Jackson's major book *Paths Towards a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Enquiry* was dedicated). In the texts produced by the Louvain school, a characteristic figure of style has been the following. The writer leaves unspecified who in fact it is who is speaking: the ethnographer, or a characteristic member of the society she describes. Unmistakably, this practice has been inspired by a justified critique of certain hegemonic and objectifying aspects of the ethnographic relationship. In the Louvain case moreover this practice is usually carried by meticulous ethnographic methods and a profound language mastery. Yet one cannot fail to observe that it is impossible to solve the hegemonic problematic of ethnography, by dissimulating that problematic (as the Louvain figure of style seems to do).

Therefore, and once again: In which cultural orientation do I find myself when as a *sangoma* in The Netherlands I offer a Southern African therapy system that is far from self-evident to most of my Dutch clients, but whose being offered by me is neither self-evident to most of my Southern African clients even though they clearly have no objection?

Mediating between two cultural orientations means that the mediator provides himself with an interface, a plateau, from which access to both cultural orientations may be gained, but that is yet not to be reduced to either. Intercultural communication is always transgressive, innovative, subject to bricolage. Genuine differences, that are based not on a performative act of will but on the inevitable, inescapable parallel implementation of two opposite and mutually irreducible points of departure, can only be reconciled (in dialogue, love, seduction, trade, diplomacy, therapy, ritual, ethnography, intercultural philosophy) in a way that essentially takes a distance from each of these points of departure and that is not compellingly imposed by either. For this purpose a new frame of reference is conjured up, one that on the one hand confirms both positions (they have to be declared valid in order to make the position of the mediator acceptable), but that on the other hand transcends them, while making reference to a good which for both parties — but not necessarily in the same way — represents a major value. This is in a nutshell the mechanism I sketch in my analysis of African reconciliation; it appears as if the same mechanism helps to elucidate, and to facilitate, intercultural exchanges including intercultural knowledge production — but at the cost, for a long time already recognised by modern hermeneutics,[129] of producing not a faithful representation of the original, but an innovative novel creation whose resemblance to the original

may be remote. We continue to be haunted by Kant's epistemology,[130] distinguishing the allegedly unknowable original from the known and appropriated, but inevitably distorted, mental image we have formed of the original.

I see my task as an intercultural philosopher primarily as that of a mediator, striving towards an empirically underpinned and practically applicable theory of cultural mediation. On the basis on inspiration from the empirical social sciences and of introspection based on my own extensive intercultural experiences, I seek to explode the philosophical self-evidences with regard to 'culture', in so far as the latter form the point of departure for all thinking about interculturality. I seek to explode the social scientific self-evidences of theory and method by reference to the much greater accumulated experience of modern philosophers when it comes to the handling of concepts and methods of thought; evidently, for this task I shall need the constant support and criticism from my new philosophical colleagues. Interculturality presupposes a medium that cannot be relegated to any of the cultural orientations which are being mediated within it; this opens up a immense space for thought experiments and imagination. On the other hand an empirical orientation means that we resign ourselves to impose limitations in this experimental and imaginary space, not only by explicit and intersubjective procedures, but also by a critical awareness of our epistemology and of its globally available alternatives. The challenges and potentials for intercultural philosophy are boundless, and so is its prophetic responsibility in the contemporary world.

13.   *Cultural diversity and universality*

These considerations lead us to what is, next to the question of humanisation from pre-human ancestors, and the possibility of intercultural knowledge and of intercultural ethics, one of the central questions of the philosophy of culture: *Why should there be this fragmentation of cultural orientations, this multiplicity of pattern formation?* Is it proper to the human condition? To language? To sensory perception? To thought? To the handling of symbols? To a specific historical phase in the human condition, which perhaps we are at the point of leaving behind us? The latter hardly seems likely, for the predictable stop-gap of every argument on cultural globalisation so far has been the emphasis on the articulation of an ever greater proliferation of separate identities each marked by cultural differences.[131] There is every indication that the philosophy of interculturality will only come of age when she shall have developed a convincing argument explaining the tendency to fragmentation in human collective patterned arrangements.

The Ghanaian philosopher Wiredu posits[132] that 'cultures' must necessarily contain a universal component because without such a component

the communication between 'cultures' would be impossible, whereas yet we see (according to him) everywhere around us that such communication is a fact.

Exactly the same argument is used by Sogolo against what he considers to be Winch's extreme relativism.[133] In passing Sogolo appeals to the principle of charity as formulated by Davidson. Sogolo thus applies this principle (as others tend to do)[134] as the *deus ex machina* of interculturality.[135] In Davidson's view, consistency is an indication of truth. The *principle of charity* stipulates that we are prepared to accept for true whatever appears to someone else as true. But underlying this technical logical usage shimmers, not by accent, the more original meaning of charity as *love for thou neighbour*, the Ancient Greek and early Christian concept of *agapè*. The intercultural implications of this view are hardly investigated by Davidson, but they amount to the kind of epistemological relativism that was formally pretended by classic cultural anthropology but that in fact — as I argue above — has never materialised in that discipline. My argument on becoming a *sangoma*[136] makes it clear that it is precisely the principle of charity, in the Davidsonian sense, that almost expelled me from ethnography.

Apparently Wiredu's intuition brings him close to realising the social implications (i.e. Shen's dilemma) of the problem of 'cultures do not exist'. Yet Wiredu's allegiance to the established concept of culture prevents him from offering an adequate solution, yea even from formulating the question with sufficient precision. Admittedly, interculturality would be an impossibility in a situation marked by the coexistence of a number of absolutely distinct cultures side by side, each culture allegedly offering to its adherents a total ordering of their life world. If we find this an undesirable conclusion (and as world citizens at the beginning of the third millennium CE we have no other choice but abhorring such a conclusion) then we have the following ways out:

- either we postulate (with Wiredu) a universal trait in every 'culture' (which would enable us to retain the established concept of culture as holistic and bounded)
- or we take a fundamentally relative view of the totality and the boundedness of culture, by postulating that every human situation always involves a variety of cultural orientations, between which there is a constant interplay, both within one person with his many, varied, and other contradictory roles, and between a number of persons in their interaction with each other.

In the first case intercultural communication is the exception, in the second case it is the rule, the normal state of affairs. From my argument it is clear that I prefer the second solution by far.

But let us pause a moment to consider Wiredu's argument. What is, in fact, the evidence that 'cultures' — or even, that the far less comprehensive cultural orientations that I would put in the place of 'cultures' — do in fact

communicate with one another? How would they be implemented to do that? How can we even so much as perceive 'cultures'? A culture is a highly aggregate, abstract construct (a construct both of the participants, and of the ethnographer), that escapes direct observation precisely as far as concerns its proclaimed totality, for such totality is only presumed and in fact illusory. All that is open to our sensory perception is the concrete behaviour of persons, and the material effects of that behaviour in the form of objects made or transformed by humans. Our fellow humanity enables us — if only after very substantial ethnographic and linguistic investments — to understand this behaviour and these objects in terms of the participants' intentionality and signification; in this way what we observe becomes more than unpredictable purely individual behaviour: we are capable of discerning collective patterns that persist in more or less unaltered form over a certain period of time — the indications of cultural orientations.

Unmistakably, two regimes of pattern formation may influence each other, as anyone can see from the interference patterns that emerge when one casts two stones of unequal weight simultaneously into the water. But this is *fusion*, not communication; *communication presupposes a medium at both sides of which the communicating entities find themselves, in such a way that in communication their being distinct and separate is both confirmed and dissolved at the same time, — we might say that they constitute themselves as different precisely in the process of communication,* of communicative union, of sameness.

We are used to thinking about 'culture' as a context of communication:[137] to the extent to which we share the same cultural orientation, we can communicate with each other. But there is a snake under the grass here: to the extent to which we share the same cultural orientation, there may not even be anything left to communicate; intracultural communication is different from intercultural communication, but it is no less problematic: both forms of communication depart from the premise of a difference that is being reduced by communication.

Regardless of the question of whether 'cultures' do or do not communicate with each other, it is an empirical fact that the bearers of explicitly different cultural orientations are capable of establishing at least a measure of communication, however defective, between their respective cultural orientations, and these bearers produce their identities and their cultural orientations precisely in the context of that communication. *Are we than allowed to reverse the argument and to claim that it is not so much the difference between distinct cultural orientations which makes intercultural communication possible, but that it is the communication itself (the* intercultural *communication, formally, but now we no longer know what meaning to attribute to 'intercultural') which engenders the positions of cultural difference in the first place?* Such a view is perfectly in line with the performative and strategic use of

claimed cultural difference in the context of the multicultural society. At the experiential level, it is confirmed by the professional experience of the ethnographer outside the North Atlantic multicultural society. For her professional role forces the ethnographer to a communication in the context of which she initially painfully experiences, and tends to reify, cultural differences vis-à-vis the local others; but gradually, as she learns and internalises the host cultural orientation, it loses all exotism for her, as a result of which the initial cultural difference appears as a temporary artefact of the initial communication situation. Frederick Barth's path-breaking work on ethnicity could be very well summarised in terms of the idea that communication (and in fact all human interaction is communicative) produces cultural difference instead of a pre-existing cultural difference engendering, secondarily, specific forms of intercultural communication.[138]

And in the end it dawns upon us that this thought constitutes in fact the oldest recorded theory of 'culture': it is the myth that sees in the construction of the tower of Babel (by far mankind's greatest communicative and collective effort to that date, regardless of whether it was real of only mythical) the origin of all cultural and linguistic diversity. It is remarkable that this myth can be found all over Africa under conditions impossible to explain away by reference to the influence of the two world religions Islam and Christianity.[139] Why would the oldest and most widespread theory of cultural difference no longer be capable of inspiring us? [140]

Notes

[1] Rural Tunisia, urban Zambia, rural Zambia, rural Guinea Bissau, and urban Botswana.

[2] Van Binsbergen & Doornbos 1987.

[3] The 'Christian' or 'Common' Era (CE) is a hegemonic North Atlantic concept whose particularism we should not dissimulate. For the great majority of people in the contemporary world, the traditional (and most probably erroneous) year of birth of the founder of Christianity is an unlikely and irrelevant calibration point for time reckoning. As is the case with so many hegemonic concepts, this calendrical concept reveals its hegemonic nature precisely by its unfounded but taken-for-granted claim of universalism.

[4] Kant 1983c.

[5] Kant 1983b; Cf. Kimmerle & Oosterling 2000; my contribution to the latter book examines Kant's aesthetics in the light of an empirical African example.

[6] Cf. Mall 1995: 92.

[7] Notably that of the 'politics of recognition'; cf. Taylor 1992.

[8] For formulations of classic cultural relativism, cf. Herskovits 1973; Nowell-Smith 1971; Rudolph 1968; Tennekes 1971. In many respects, the problematic of cultural relativism is the mirror image of the problematic of interculturality; the field is too complex than to expect that justice will be done to it in the present, limited context. For an interesting exploration, cf. Procée 1991. Around Gellner an important group of critics of cultural relativism has formed, cf.: Aya 1996; Boudon 1996; Gellner 1996. Also cf. the exhange between Geertz and Gellner: Geertz 1995; Gellner 1995; and Geertz 1984.

9   Shen, in preparation.
10   Tylor 1871.
11   Herder n.d.
12   This does however not exonerate him from charges of racism, which in recent debates have been levelled against not only Herder, but also Kant (in his non-critical, anthropological work) and other Enlightenment philosophers; cf. Eze 1996, 1997; Bernal 1987; Rose 1990; Kant 1983d. However, these allegations have met with forceful defenses of the Enlightenment philosophers as pillars of universalism and tolerance: Palter 1996b; Norton 1996; Jenkyns 1996. The truth is that, while unmistakably, and forgivably, children of their time and age and hence racists, they were often (like Herder in much of his writings, and Kant in his critical work), and to their great credit, able to rise above these limitations.
13   Cf. Headland, Pike & Harris 1990; cf. Harris 1969, ch. 20, pp. 568-604 who was seriously criticised by Burling 1969; Müller 1983.
14   Cf. Beattie 1964.
15   I am deliberately using the anthropological technical term 'avoidance', that designates a mode of highly elusive and restrictive behaviour of individuals belonging to social categories between which strong structural tensions exist, e.g. son-in-law and mother-in-law.
16   Van Beek 1991; Kloos 1987; Lewis 1951; Harris 1969.
17   How fast the social appropriation of the concept of 'culture' has proceeded in recent decades is manifest, for instance, from the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* of 1978, where 'culture' still only occurs in the sense of religious worship (first attested in English in 1483), agriculture (1626), and civilising activity (1510, 1805). Little c.s. 1978 *s.v.* 'culture'.
18   Some examples from among countless many are: Appiah 1992; Copleston 1980; Gyegye 1997; Kimmerle 1994a; Mall 1995; Sogolo 1998; the latter article is an excerpt from: Sogolo 1993.
19   Mall 1995, ch. 1; cf. Mall 1993.
20   Since the nineteenth century (of the North Atlantic era; the self-evidence of the so-called Common Era is in itself a hegemonic claim to be deconstructed!) Eurocentrism has taken a North Atlantic variant which comprises not only Western Europe but also North America.
21   Hegel 1992; for a critical distance from the perspective of contemporary intercultural philosophy, cf. Kimmerle 1993; also Eze 1996, 1997.
22   For striking relevant passages, cf. Rorty 1997.
23   Rattansi 1994.
24   Mudimbe 1988, 1992a; cf. my extensive study of Mudimbe, van Binsbergen 2001.
25   Deleuze c.s. 1980; Deleuze & Guattari 1972, 1991; Guattari 1992; Oosterling & Thisse 1998; van Binsbergen 1999g.
26   For an authoritative overview cf. Hale & Wright 1999.
27   Cf. Hookway 1993; Quine 1960, 1970, 1990b; Gadamer 1967; Volosinov 1973; and the notorious polemics between Searle and Derrida: Searle 1977, 1983; Derrida 1988; cf. Hadreas n.d.
28   Thus it is remarkable that in Genzler's (1993) thorough review of contemporary translation theories in five chapters, only one chapter was to be devoted to philosophical theories notably deconstructionism *à la* Derrida c.s., while the great majority of reflection in this fundamental field of study came from cultural theorists, anthropologists and literary scholars.
29   Cf. Raju 1966.

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[30] In the face of such global diversity, one is amazed to see the term 'intercultural' frequently used to refer to exchanges between speakers of German, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, and Scandinavian languages within the European Union — af if these languages could still legitimately count as the boundary marker of just as many distinct 'cultures'; however, I prefer to see the case as a plurality intimately related local linguistic forms within one comprehensive North Atlantic civilisation at the beginning of the third millennium of the Common Era.

[31] I am grateful to Heinz Kimmerle and Henk Oosterling for pointing out serious shortcomings in an earlier version of this paragraph.

[32] Cf. Kimmerle 1990.

[33] Perpeet 1974, with exhaustive bibliographical references. The history of the concept of 'culture' between Roman antiquity and the eighteenth century is exhaustively treated in: Niedermann 1941.

[34] I define a civilisation as a socio-political system which — by virtue of such institutions as food production, state formation, writing and organised religion — displays a considerable degree of continuity over a vast geographical area and within which a plurality of cultural orientations are comprised. The contradiction between 'culture' and civilisation, as posed by Kant and as elaborated by Spengler, is not fertile from a cultural anthropological perspective. Outside the German language area it has not been common to make such a distinction. Cf. Perpeet 1974, especially cols. 1318f.; Kant 1983a; Spengler 1993: 42f.

[35] Spengler 1993.

[36] Gehlen 1977; Rothacker 1920, 1926; Schoeps 1966: 216f; Achterhuis 1992.

[37] Cf. Palmer 1969.

[38] Grawe 1974.

[39] Main events in this debate are, in alphabetic order: Appiah 1992; Duerr 1981; Gellner 1959; Gellner 1990; Hallen & Sodipo 1986; Hollis & Lukes 1982; Horton & Finnegan; Horton 1967; Kippenberg & Luchesi 1978; Sogolo 1993; Wilson 1970; Winch 1964, 1970. Winch's main inspiration was: Wittgenstein 1953.

[40] For the potential relevance of Guattari & Deleuze's work for contemporary cultural anthropology, cf. van Binsbergen 1999g. Meanwhile this does not take away the fact that — as I argue at length in the article cited — Guattari himself has only realised this potential in a very partial way, while relying on concepts and points of view which are unacceptable for professional anthropologists today.

[41] Mall 1995, which leans heavily on the post-structuralist philosophy of difference; Kimmerle 1990, 1994b; Kimmerle & Wimmer 1997; Kimmerle & Oosterling 2000; Oosterling 1989, 1996.

[42] Considering the abundance of ethnonymic reference in his work, this is implicitly the — obsolescent — position taken by Lévi-Strauss and by most anthropologists of his generation. The post-structuralist philosophers have only a limited discourse on other cultural orientations than those which have been bundled in contemporary North Atlantic society.

[43] Van Binsbergen 1999.

[44] Van Binsbergen 1992b, 1993 = 1996d.

[45] Godelier 1975; Hindess & Hirst 1975; Jewsiewicki c.s. 1985; Kahn & Llobera 1981; Meillassoux 1975; Rey 1971; Suret-Canale 1974; Terray 1969; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a, 1985b.

[46] Cf. van Binsbergen 1981.

[47] Van Binsbergen 1997f, 1998a.

[48] Needham c.s. 1961, 1956; Beckh 1961.

[49] Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998; MacGaffey 1986.

[50] Harding 1997, cf. 1994. A rather less extreme form of the same idea underlies: Houtondji 1994.

[51] Contemporary epistemological insights begin to take a distance from the distinction between natural sciences and humanities ('Geisteswissenschaften' that only one or two generations ago was taken for granted (cf. d'Agostino 1993, who bases himself specifically on: Bernstein 1983; Rorty 1979; Putnam 1978, 1981). I myself also make only a gradual distinction between natural and social sciences when it comes to the possibility and desirability of alternative epistemologies.

[52] On philosophy as an intersubjective activity, cf. e.g. Luijpen 1980, ch. 1.

[53] Sokal & Bricmont 1997.

[54] In Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* (Multatuli 2001), the masterpiece of this leading nineteenth-century Dutch novelist, Droogstoppel is an extremely prosaic character, a merchant devoid of all feeling for poetry and for the imaginary in general.

[55] Sokal 1996a. The result was a minor affair in the pages of *Le Monde* and the *New York Review of Books*: Boghossian 1996; Bricmont 1997; Duclos 1997; Levisalles 1996; Rio 1997; Salomon 1997; Sokal 1996b, 1996c, 1997; Weill 1996; Weinberg 1996; Weinberg *et al.* 1996.

[56] Cf. van Binsbergen 1999g.

[57] This is incidentally how I came to support the Egyptocentric variety of academic Afrocentrism: I cynically started to write a book-length attack of it (van Binsbergen, in preparation (a)). Cf below, section 11.

[58] Ahmad 1992; Breckenridge & van der Veer 1993; Clifford 1988a; Lewis 1993; Said 1978; Turner 1994; van der Veer 1995.

[59] Cf. on Muchona and Turner: Turner 1967; de Boeck & Devisch 1994; Shorter 1972; Papstein 1978. On Ogotomêlli and Griaule: Griaule 1966; Clifford 1988; Copans 1973; Goody 1967; Lettens 1971; Ogono d'Arou 1956; Sarevskaja 1963; the most dismissive reinterpretation of Griaule in the 1990s has been Wouter van Beek's in *Current Anthropology* (van Beek 1991).

[60] Kimmerle 1997; Odera Oruka 1990b.

[61] Derrida 1967.

[62] Albright 1966; Bernal 1990; Best & Woudhuizen 1988; Bottéro 1992; de Mecquenem 1949; Diringer 1996; Evans 1909; Gelb 1963; Gimbutas 1991, ch. 8: 'The sacred script'; Gordon 1982; Hassan 1983; Karlgren 1940; Labat 1988; Lambert 1976; Marshack 1972; Naveh 1982; Parpola 1994; Ray 1986; Schmandt-Besserat 1992; Thompson 1960; Coe 1992; and extensive references contained in these publications. For the anthropological approach to writing, cf. Goody 1968, 1986; Lemaire 1984.

[63] I am not speaking as an outsider to this field of study; cf. van Binsbergen 1997c, 1997g; and in preparation (b).

[64] Cf. van Binsbergen 1997c.

[65] See below, section 9; van Binsbergen 1991.

[66] Brown 1984.

[67] Derrida 1972.

[68] Amselle 1990; Amselle & M'bokolo 1985; Barth 1969; Chrétien & Prunier 1989; Fardon 1987; Gutkind 1970; Helm 1968; Vail 1989b; van Binsbergen 1985, 1992a=1994c, 1997d.

[69] Cf. Dwyer 1977.

[70] Lévy-Bruhl 1910, 1922, 1927, 1952.

[71] Cf. Kristeva 1983.

72 Cf. the exchange between van der Geest and myself in *Human Organization*, 38, 2 (1979) (van der Geest 1979; van Binsbergen 1979) and van Binsbergen 1986-87.

73 Exceptions are: Salamone 1979; MacGaffey 1986; Kloos 1996; Olivier de Sardan 1995; Todorov 1988; Sperber 1985; Kaplan 1984; Roth 1989.

74 Fabian 1983. By a remarkable coincidence, Fabian's title is identical to that of a book published by Levinas in the same year in French. Levinas does not play a role in Fabian's argument; cf. Levinas 1983.

75 Baudrillard 1976; Foucault 1973; Hobbes 1962; Ricoeur 1975; Schutz 1977, 1990.

76 Kloos 1987.

77 Interesting attempts however may be found in: Aya 1996; Azoulay 1994; Bateson 1978; Carruthers *et al.* 1985; Hudson 1989; Jackson 1989; Kaplan 1984; Larson & Deutsch 1988; Leeuw 1987; Müller *et al.* 1984; Northrop & Livingston 1964; Passaro 1997; Salamone 1979; Skorupski 1976.

78 Benedict 1946; cf. Nietzsche 1967-1980a. Also cf. Barnouw 1949.

79 Sahlins 1976.

80 Kant 1983c (*Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 1781/1787).

81 Cf. Drechsel 1984.

82 Cf. the above footnote on the discussion initiated by Winch (section 3.4); as is clear from the extensive list of references there, that discussion — however shunned by most contemporary anthropologists — has become a fixed point of orientation within African philosophy.

83 Cf. Clifford 1988b: 38f; Ricoeur 1971; Geertz 1973; Geertz 1976; Geertz 1983; Agar 1980.

84 For a regrettable, though by its own standards impressive, example of such an approach to ethnography, cf. Drews 1995.

85 For instance the work, very influential in contemporary anthropology, by Jean Comaroff en John Comaroff, 1991-97. This does not take away the fact that Foucault had already been signalled much earlier by a handful of anthropologists such as Rabinow and Clifford, as well as by the anthropologically-inclined literature scholar *cum* philosopher Mudimbe.

86 Cf. Geuijen 1992.

87 Quine 1990a.

88 Bhabha 1986; Young 1995.

89 Sartre 1943; Luijpen 1980: 280f. The danger of reduction of the other to self is also a recurrent theme in Levinas' work, cf. Levinas 1983, 1972, 1987 ; Becker 1981; Bernasconi 1986.

90 For a Foucaultian critique of this illusion, based on the concept of genealogy (which is ultimately Nietzschean), see: Rabinow 1984; Foucault 1977. Cf. Kimmerle 1985; and: Nietzsche 1967-1980b. The impossibility of an epistemological Archimedean point is also argued in: Rorty 1979; and from a totally different point of view in: Putnam, 1978, 1981. Such impossibility, in other words, is a received idea in contemporary philosophy.

91 Cf. Koepping 1984; van Binsbergen 1984.

92 Merton 1968: 51; Hayek 1973-1978.

93 Fabian 1983.

94 Lyotard 1979.

95 Asad 1973; Copans 1975; Said 1978.

96 Rattansi 1994; Boyne & Rattansi 1990; Donald & Rattansi 1992; Spivak 1987, 1988, 1990.

97 For an example of such a strategy, cf. van Binsbergen 1992b: 58f.

98 Habermas 1982.

[99] Cf. van Binsbergen 1984, 1988b.

[100] Cf. Chilungu 1984.

[101] Mudimbe 1988, 1991, 1992b; Mudimbe & Appiah 1993; Appiah 1992; Jewsiewicki & Mudimbe 1993. Cf. van Binsbergen 2001.

[102] Cf. Lewis 1981

[103] Winch 1970: 100f; Sogolo 1993; Jarvie 1972.

[104] This argument is carried forward, or so I intended, in the Preface to this book.

[105] Van Binsbergen 1980a, 1980b; 1985b, forthcoming (c).

[106] Van Binsbergen 1988a.

[107] Van Binsbergen 1991.

[108] Cf. dos Santos 1901; van Binsbergen 1996b.

[109] Van Binsbergen 1991: 314; obviously I then used the concept of 'culture' in a different sense from my present argument.

[110] From numerous discussions of this ancient Chinese divinatory text I mention: Legge 1993; Jung 1974; Wilhelm 1948.

[111] Van Binsbergen 1994b, 1995, 1996b, 1996c, 1996e, 1999f, in preparation (b).

[112] This is no exaggeration, cf. the extensive criticism of this line in my work by Amselle 2001: 53f; Amselle's disgust is so great that he can only understand my defense of Afrocentricity as an act of sheer opportunism — which I then happen to share, much to my honour and pleasure, with another target of Amselle's, Cathérine Coquery-Vidrovitch, one of France's leading African historians (Amselle 2001: 109f and n. 90).

[113] Carroll 1998.

[114] The topic of Afro-european or Eurafrican cultural and historical continuities is pursued at length in van Binsbergen, in preparation (a), cf. 1997c.

[115] Bernal 1987, 1991.

[116] Bernal 1987; Burkert 1992; Evangeliou 1994; James 1973; Lefkowitz 1996; Palter 1996a; Preus 1992; West 1971.

[117] Van Binsbergen 1997a.

[118] Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers 1996

[119] Cf. van Binsbergen 2001.

[120] Cf. Appiah 1993.

[121] Appiah 1992:161f. For a refutation of these two points, see my *Black Athena Alive* (in press), especially the contribution by Stricker c.s.; and van Binsbergen, in preparation (a).

[122] Appiah 1992: 174; cited in approval in: Bell 1997, p. 218f, n. 29.

[123] Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998: 209.

[124] However, see: van Binsbergen 1996a, 1997a. For the reception of the *Black Athena* discussion among African and African American intellectuals, including Appiah en Mudimbe, cf: van Binsbergen 1997b; Berlinerblau 1999 .

[125] Asante 1990.

[126] Cf. Brocker & Nau 1997; Garaudy 1977; Janz 1997; Kimmerle 1992; Kimmerle 1995; Odera Oruka 1990a. In the background this is informed by a dialogical conception of philosophy, going back to Plato and having received a new impetus, in modern times, by Bakhtin and the thought of such great Jewish thinkers as Buber and Levinas; cf. Buber 1962; Levinas 1972, 1973, 1987; and as commentators Bernasconi 1988; Todorov 1981; Thomson 1991; Simons 1992. From more specifically cultural anthropological perspectives, cf. Abbink 1989; Dwyer 1977; Dwyer 1982; Pool 1994; Tyler 1987; Webster 1982.

[127] Van Binsbergen 1994b, 1995, 1997e; a revised English version of the last article is in press in my *Intercultural encounters: African lessons for a philosophy of interculturality*; provisional version available at http://come.to/african_religion.

128   Jackson 1989: x.
129   Cf. Palmer 1969.
130   Kant 1983c.
131   Cf. Appadurai 1997; Brightman1995; Featherstone 1990, 1995; Friedman 1995; Hannerz 1992; Robertson & Lechner 1985; Robertson 1992; van Binsbergen 1994a, 1997f, 1998a.
132   Wiredu 1996, 1998.
133   Sogolo 1993.
134   E.g. Procée 1991: 143.
135   Cf. Davidson 1984.
136   Van Binsbergen 1991, 1998b; an English version of the latter article is in press in my *Intercultural encounters: African lessons for a philosophy of interculturality*; provisional version available at http://come.to/african_religion.
137   Cf. Baudrillard 1983; Fabian 1979; Leach 1976; Shadid 1993.
138   Barth 1969; Govers & Vermeulen 1997.
139   Cf. Sasson 1980; Frobenius 1931: 169; Roberts 1973: 30f, 147f; van Binsbergen 1981: 335; van Binsbergen 1992b: 149f, 235. Babel is mentioned once in the *Qur'an* (2: 96), but as a centre of magic, not of architecture nor of ethnic or linguistic diversity.

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