

# The translation of Southern African *sangoma* divination towards a global format, and the validity of the knowledge it produces

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## *Abstract*

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

*interculturality*,<sup>1</sup> of which the present paper is chapter 7 in a revised version:

- my own extensive and painful confrontation as an anthropologist with non-Western world views in a number of fieldwork settings;
- my long-standing practice (as from 1990) of one non-Western knowledge system as a *sangoma*, i.e. a spirit medium/ diviner/ healer/priest in the Southern African tradition;
- my extensive evidence that knowledge sources not recognised by North Atlantic science can yet yield valid knowledge;
- my attempt to formulate a non-relativist unitary epistemology;
- and my long-ranging historical and comparative analyses that help establish the empirical conditions which underpin my claims that ‘cultures do not exist’, that all human knowledge production is interconnected and therefore subjected to a converging epistemology.

The argument of my paper seeks to unfold the epistemological problems that *sangomahood* poses. It presents an argument in which

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<sup>1</sup> To appear mid-2003 with Lit Verlag, Berlin.

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

### *Bio-/bibliographical note*

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and *The dynamics of power and the rule of law*, both to appear in 2003. He is editor-in-chief of *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*. Besides his academic and literary work, he has been a practicing diviner-healer in the Southern African tradition since 1990.

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### *1. Introduction*

The preceding two chapters of *Intercultural encounters* have described at length how I became a Southern African diviner-priest (*sangoma*) and how over the years I kept up this identity as a form of risky balancing between African traditional beliefs and my life as a professor and family man in the North Atlantic. My first report on these developments (*Intercultural encounters*, chapter 5)<sup>2</sup> ended on a declaration to the effect that I refused to try and analyse what *sangomahood* and its most conspicuous ritual, the divinatory session, amounted to, and what mechanisms informed the latter. More than a decade later I feel I can no longer go on invoking the lessons I derived from *sangomahood* as – among other things – a sustained experiment in interculturality (these lessons form a central theme in *Intercultural encounters*), and at the same time treating the topic as a black box. Over the years my identity as a *sangoma* has become sufficiently secure and professional to enable me to attempt the self-reflective, philosophically informed analysis contained in the following pages. A decade ago I thought that my commitment to Africa and to *sangomahood* was best served by claiming for both, on hardly more than emotional grounds, a domain in which they would be safe from hegemonic deconstruction – and where I would be safe with them. Now however I realise that the only way to seriously discharge these commitments, and to reap the benefits of my own enhanced

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<sup>2</sup> Earlier published as van Binsbergen 1991b.

personal and intercultural security and (hopefully) sophistication, is by thinking up a unitary space of meaning, truth and agency in which it is to be possible:

- to think about *sangomahood* in terms that have currency and meaning in the North Atlantic region, and at the same time
- to think about North Atlantic knowledge and belief in terms that have currency and meaning within *sangomahood*.

To try and discharge this difficult task is the aim of the present chapter.

As set out in Chapter 5 of *Intercultural encounters*, I was brought to accept the status of *sangoma* diviner-healer-priest which was offered to me, and so I myself have become the certified exponent of a local African belief and therapy system. Soon this specialist role was to be exercised not only in Botswana but also in the North Atlantic, in combination even with a professorial chair in anthropology. Inevitably I found myself caught in all sorts of epistemological, social, medical and legal dilemmas; a meticulous discussion of these dilemmas (discussed at length in chapters 6-8 of *Intercultural encounters*) allows us to draw the intercultural lessons from becoming a *sangoma*. Instead of being a merely performative leap into anti-intellectualist obscurantism inspired by shallow and guilt-ridden feelings of intercontinental solidarity, the intercultural adoption and practice of a local system of belief and ritual forces us (according to the argument in my paper) to address explicitly the contradictions inherent in established North Atlantic procedures of intercultural knowledge production. Not only do these chapters challenge, on political grounds, the common condescending assumption, among North Atlantic students of African religion that reductionist deconstruction is their only permissible analytical stance, proceeding from the political to the epistemological domain, the

argument of the present paper leads us to suspect that, when an independent epistemology outside the North Atlantic (like the *sangomas'* epistemology) acknowledges sources of knowledge not recognised in North Atlantic scientifically underpinned convictions, recognition in itself may bring these sources to flow and to yield valid knowledge. We are thus reminded of the dangers attached to any attempt to think interculturality along lines of conceptualisation and epistemology exclusively set by North Atlantic intellectual traditions.

My argument in chapters 6-8 of *Intercultural encounters* also offers other, more dynamic, solutions to the problem of intercultural integrity: if *sangomahood* is a responsibility to insert oneself into the stream of life force and to assist others in doing so, and if this is to bring about the transformation of death into life on which *sangomahood* revolves as a form of ancestral-orientated spirituality, then it cannot remain a learned lesson faithfully and punctually brought into practice. On the contrary, its claims to integrity have to be assessed by a different standard, notably by the extent to which the *sangoma* manages to realise such transformation in the sense of redefining *sangomahood* into a new and viable form. In chapter 7 the details of such transformation are presented and analysed with both frankness and confidence when I deal with my attempts to create and mediate a *sangomahood* that has a global format and uses the Internet as its vehicle. In chapter 8 the foundations and the justification for such an attempt at deliberate globalisation are strengthened by situating *sangomahood* into a coherent picture of spirituality, symbolism and shamanism that has a very wide distribution in both space and time. And again in chapter 7, the earlier abyss of multiculturality into which integrity and knowledge threatened to sink, is argued to be chimerical, an artefact of the boundary imposition we are tempted to engage in for

geopolitical, hegemonic reasons. Instead, a unitary epistemology is argued to create the possibility of an intercultural truth that renders (epistemological, and cultural) relativism an obsolete position.

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

In the late 1990s I could still write:

'The surplus value which sangomahood yet holds for me, has also been the reason why in later years I could not bring myself to probe into the epistemological status of my sangoma

knowledge and of the representations of the supernatural that sangomahood entails.'<sup>3</sup>

Do I truly believe in the tenets of Nkoya witchcraft and kingship which I act out in Zambia? Do I truly believe in the *sangoma* world view which I act out in Botswana, the Netherlands, and worldwide on the Internet? For many years I have postponed facing up to these obvious and legitimate questions, because I felt that any attempt to discursively answer these questions, would take me back to the condescending, deconstructivist anthropological stance I had hoped to escape from by 'becoming a *sangoma*'.

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

## 2. Towards a global format of *sangomahood*

In my early stages of studying and practising *sangomahood*, both in the Southern African and the North Atlantic context, I translated the basic characteristics of the *sangoma* divination system into a computer program. This exercise did more than force me to make explicit for myself the inner workings of the system. As a form of appropriation and rendering – as faithfully as possible – a local cultural system in a new, alien format, such translation was a form of practical

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<sup>3</sup> See section 5.3 of *Intercultural encounters*.

ethnography. And it was a major step towards reformulating the *sangoma* system, originally confined to the cultural and social premises of Southern African society, in such a way that I could present it to a worldwide audience, not so much as an ethnographer does to his fellow anthropologists, but as a practising *sangoma* does to his prospective clients. In the first few years after writing the program, I would merely use it to prepare, a day beforehand, for real-life sessions where my clients would meet me in person, usually at my home, for long face-to-face sessions involving the throwing of real tablets, after a long intercultural explanation. In the second half of the 1990s my being a *sangoma* received considerable coverage in the Dutch and Belgian media, which brought people to contact me by letters and telephone. In late 1998 I began to use the Internet as a means of scientific communication and information, and within a few months I had posted many of my writings on *sangomahood* and intercultural philosophy on a personal website. I began to be approached via e-mail by distant prospective clients, whom I could refer to my web pages for background information. Thus gradually a global practice emerged, where I would no longer meet my patients in person, but they – invariably total strangers to me – would contact me via an electronic intake form on my website, and they would subsequently receive via e-mail the outcome of the session I would conduct in their absence. I came to prefer this globalised format, especially because its communication is exclusively taking place via e-mail. In this way I could fit the sessions and the correspondence much more easily into my tight timetable, and I was relieved from nearly unbearable pressure. For no longer would I have to effectively perform as a diviner before the client; no longer would I have to know actively and by heart all the complex implications of the oracular catalogue (in the program they would neatly and in full appear on the computer screen, at every virtual ‘throw’); and no longer would I

have to confront the client, directly and face-to-face, with such knowledge (potentially incorrect) about that client’s personal situation as I derived from the oracle. Under the new electronic format I could globally mediate a system of meaning and redress that I had experienced as eminently effective and meaningful myself, without shedding the commitments (towards a Southern African religious specialism, and towards suffering people in need of my assistance) that had informed my initiation into *sangomahood*, but also without constant violence to my personal psychological well-being, nor to the North Atlantic cultural and social context I found myself in.

This new, current phase of my *sangomahood* obviously contains lessons as to what it is to represent, mediate and practice a local cultural model outside its original context.<sup>4</sup> But it contains another lesson that may be even more original and important. It drove home to me the epistemological implications of *sangoma* divination, and thus brought out what initially I had taken for granted but had been too timid to claim and argue explicitly: my continued identification with *sangomahood* was not only a political stance of dogged solidarity ('if my Southern African hosts and friends take *sangomahood* seriously, who am I to deconstruct it as an idiom of illusion and power?'), it was not only an escape into an African identity after a childhood that had made me less than proud of my European identity – it was also, far less personally and far more interestingly, an acknowledgement of the fact that genuine knowledge is to be found also in *sangomahood* and not only in North Atlantic science. In this chapter I shall concentrate on the latter, epistemological theme.

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<sup>4</sup> Also in my discussion of the concept of *ubuntu* in chapter 14 of *Intercultural encounters* I will take up the question as to what happens when a Southern African traditional idiom is appropriated by outsiders and subsequently mediated in a globalised format.

### 3. Technical procedure

Let me first describe the current procedures in my *sangoma* practice in some detail.

My *sangoma* oracular program happens to be on a stand-alone Macintosh microcomputer without Internet connection. The intake form reaches me on a different, Windows-operated, computer where all subsequent e-mail correspondence with the clients is also conducted.<sup>5</sup> I use the keyboard and mouse of the stand-alone computer to enter the meagre details of a client's intake form into the program I have written. A dialogue box appears. I type a question on behalf of the client (gradually, in subsequent throws, creatively refining the question while the client is and remains absent). I press the Enter button activating the computer's random generator facility so as to produce one of the sixteen oracular combinations. Next, verbally interpreting that combination as a reply to the question, I type the answer onto the dialogue box that appears subsequently. The sequence of question and answers combines into an unfolding narrative. After a series of thirty to forty throws, i.e. combinations, the session's narrative approaches its natural conclusion. The session's end has to be announced by the random appearance of the combination Mbango at this point: , whose usual associated meanings are:

'fence post; home; patrilineal kin; dust raised by covering a grave; death; threat; a womb; pregnancy; dust of travelling; accomplished *sangomahood*; intestines; domestic lizard; python';

however, towards the end of the session this combination always means:

'the bones wish to sleep'.

<sup>5</sup> So it is unlikely that during the sessions the Internet in itself could have served as a medium to transmit the telepathic influences which, as I shall argue below, might constitute a likely explanation of the extraordinary phenomena encountered in *sangoma* divination.

The session cannot be concluded until the combination *Mbango* has appeared. Finally the program produces a full protocol document setting out all the successive throws, questions, and interpreted answers, and yielding (because the successive answers constitute a narrative) not only a more or less coherent interpretation of the client's predicament in ancestral and (rarely) witchcraft terms and ritual advice towards its redress, but also extensive and detailed biographical information which the client will recognise as partly correct even though it was never provided by the client himself on the intake form.

The distant client will receive this protocol by e-mail. Here the various throws of the sessions will be recorded in a way illustrated by Table 1.

### 4. The oracle as a source of information

Two sources of information in the *sangoma* divination session are uncontroversially given:

- (a) what the client brings to the session in terms of explicit personal information disclosed to the diviner, and
- (b) what the diviner can draw from the *sangoma* oracle's standardised, conventionalised catalogue of meanings and symbolic implications, each meaning indicated by one of sixteen named combinations produced by the fall of the four distinctively marked tablets.

If the combination of (a) and (b) exhaustively described the information content of the divination process, divination would not be an independent source of valid knowledge. All the diviner would be doing would amount to dexterously juggling – in perfunctory reference to the completely accidental fall of the tablets – the variety of meanings under (b), and weave these into an intelligent, consciously made-up story about (a), to which the diviner consciously adds his

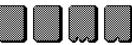
... end of throw 3 ....

question: what sort of help and treatment does the client need?

throw no. 4      *Mbunga* (15) hidden combination =      *Mashangula* (16)

peripheral is:      closed

hidden combination inspected

stays with hidden combination:      *Mashangula* (16) 

\*chosen aspect:      there are indications that there is something missing in the client's family life and sex life, or that he has a sexually transmitted disease, perhaps AIDS

question: is there something wrong with the client in the sense that he has a sexually transmitted disease?

throw no. 5      *Take* (7) hidden combination =      *Mpululu* (8)

peripheral is:      closed

hidden combination inspected

stays with hidden combination: *Mpululu* (8) 

\*chosen aspect:      the answer is ambiguous since it indicates that, even if it were the case that the client has a sexually transmitted disease, this may not exclusively be to his disadvantage

question: did the client recently lose a beloved lover?

throw no. 6      *Kwaga* (13) hidden combination =      *Shilume* (2)

peripheral is:      open

there is no reason to pay special attention to the hidden combination

hidden combination left uninspected, ignored

stays with the original combination *Kwaga* (13) 

\*chosen aspect:      it looks as if he did lose a lover, or was unable to develop a love relationship, because his life was being overshadowed by his mother

question: is his mother exerting a positive influence on his life? [follows throw no. 7, etc.]

Table 1. A fragment of the protocol of a *sangoma* divination session in a globalised format and to be dispatched as e-mail.

advice about possible courses for ritual and practical action, which if executed might enhance the client's grip on her or his life. The diviner would know that the divination session's content was deliberately constructed from his matching (a) and (b) into a coherent story, and would be able to recount the steps in that construction. The session protocol would be some kind of a personalised poem with exhortative power, the latter enhanced because of the diviner's effective performative display during real-life sessions (which, however, is greatly reduced if the contact between diviner and client only takes place electronically and the session is conducted in the absence of the client).

I have repeatedly described the *sangoma* divination in the above terms in earlier publications, without more than passing reference to the possibility that, beyond the placebo effect implied in the above divinatory model, the session might also be:

(c) an independent source of knowledge in its own right –

in other words, knowledge that, under the prevailing sensorialist assumptions of contemporary empirical science, would be considered to be utterly unavailable to the diviner since it could not have reached him through his sense organs.

Much of chapter 5 of *Intercultural encounters* was about the social and personal pressures that brought a specialist in the anthropology of religion to the point where he was prepared to adopt local religious beliefs and practices because he could not bear the breach of sociability implied in the alternative (i.e. the continuation of his deconstructive analytical distance). We need to realise at this point that the implicit acceptance of local belief as an idiom of sociability works also in the North Atlantic. Ever since the eighteenth century, the popularisation of the ideals and achievements of the Enlightenment has installed powerful collective representations in the North Atlantic region in the form of rationalism, sensorialism, secularisation of the world view, scepticism, scientism. Ironically, today's common collective representations have continued to cling to a Cartesian body-mind dualism, that has been largely discarded by professional philosophers in the course of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Foucault<sup>7</sup> has argued that scientific rationality has supplanted religion as the central touchstone of truth, morality and political legitimisation in the Modern Age. In the light of these contemporary collective representations in the North Atlantic, it means a breach of the locally prevailing canons of sociability when a returning fieldworker emphatically and without ostentatious irony claims occult experiences and powers, publicly displayed allegiance to which was informing her sociability only a short while earlier, when still in the field.

The social sanctions springing from such a breach of North Atlantic sociability ('how could you be a *sangoma* and a university professor at the same time, tell us!'), are based – as I shall critically argue below – not only on a relativist departmentalisation of the world into distinct cultures, but also on perceived incongruency between non-Western world views and dominant collective

representations in the North. The latter pose as, and are felt to be, unshakable scientific truths established once and for all, but of course that is only an illusion. All collective representations take on absolute connotations for those upholding them; Durkheim, to whom we owe the concept and the theory of 'collective representations' (*représentations collectives*), has argued that this is how society constructs itself while endowing itself with the characteristics of the sacred.<sup>8</sup> Seen in this light, these modernist contemporary collective representations, although scientific in appearance, might be exposed to be merely *scientistic* – they assume the trappings of science but are inherently non-scientific in that they fail to recognise the limitations of science. They cannot accommodate the notion according to which every scientific truth is *by definition* provisional and ephemeral, merely waiting for its refutation or at best reformulation under a new, equally provisional and ephemeral truth.<sup>9</sup>

Today's common scientistic collective representations tend to deny (in the name of a dated scientific world view, the mechanicism and sensorialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century CE) that there could be any truth in telepathy, psychokinesis, and other topics studied by parapsychology; we shall come back to this dismissive attitude below. By the same token this scientistic world view includes the conviction that there could not possibly be *some infinitesimal, residual* truth in astrology and other forms of divination. Yet these divinatory disciplines constitute forms of systematic knowledge (even, in the case of astrology, highly mathematical forms, and dependent on scientific astronomy, with all the appearances of rationality) that from the very beginnings of human science in Ancient

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<sup>8</sup> Durkheim 1912.

<sup>9</sup> Popper 1959. Interestingly, Popper deploys the same criterion (lack of interest in refutation) to attack astrology (1959: 34, 38).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ryle 1949; Hart 1988, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault 1963, 1969.

Mesopotamia five millennia ago,<sup>10</sup> right up to the Enlightenment, were so much at the centre of what people considered valid scientific knowledge that for centuries they were taught at European universities. It is only in the last two hundred years that they have been effectively relegated to the status of pseudo-sciences, a dismissal authoritatively endorsed by the twentieth century's most vocal philosopher of science, Karl Popper.<sup>11</sup> Beside constituting a *prima facie* case for rejection by the philosophy of science, most philosophers today would not even consider the topic worthy of their interest,<sup>12</sup> having their negative opinion confirmed by Barthes, who in his *Mythologiques* says of astrology:

‘What it does is to exorcise the real even by speaking about it. (...) Astrology is the writing *par excellence* of the petty bourgeois world.’<sup>13</sup>

However, it is now time to play a powerful trump and claim that, whether we like it or not and whether our theories can accommodate such a state of affairs or not, the *sangoma* oracle is an independent machine for the production of valid knowledge.

If I had not found this truth so often (although far from invariably) confirmed in hundreds of situations when, over the past twelve years, I have engaged in *sangoma*

<sup>10</sup> Bottéro 1992; van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Popper 1976: 38.

<sup>12</sup> However, cf. Seidel 1971.

<sup>13</sup> Barthes 1957: 168; emphasis original:

‘Elle sert à exorciser le réel en le nommant. (...) L’astrologie est la littérature du monde petit-bourgeois.’

There has been some sociological research to back up Barthes' sociological intuition as to the lower-middle class locus of astrology consumption in contemporary western Europe, cf. Couderc 1934; Maitre 1968. Outside Europe, such research has been conducted in India: Padhye 1937; Pugh 1983a, 1983b, 1984. Studies and pamphlets setting out the scientific and ethical objections against astrology are numerous. For a comprehensive treatment, cf. Couderc 1980; van Klinkenberg 1983; Bok *et al.* 1975.

divination, I would have long ceased to identify as a *sangoma*. I would have given in to the professional and general North Atlantic cultural pressures to drop such an utterly unscientific celebration of ‘superstition’ and ‘pseudo-science’. I would have returned to the religious anthropological position initially taught to me by my teachers to the effect that African religion, including *sangomahood*, cannot be a source of valid knowledge in its own right and is only meaningfully to be discussed in terms of condescending deconstruction, as some sort of African pseudo-science. Yes, ‘pseudo-science’ should be the sceptics designation for *sangomahood*, i.e. in the same bracket with astrology, almost deserving of that honourable qualification ‘science’, and not merely an exotic superstition devoid of specialist and accumulative rationality. I will use different and far more neutral characterisations: towards the end of this chapter I shall summarise my historical and formal arguments for assigning to *sangomahood* a rightful place in the global history of science.

If I had not experienced the empirical validity of the knowledge generated by *sangoma* divination, I might never have strayed from my career as an empirical social anthropologist. I would not have been forced to contemplate the nature of intercultural knowledge construction sufficiently long and profoundly so as to become, willy-nilly, an intercultural philosopher and write a book like *Intercultural encounters*. Also, at least some of my clients would have seen through my game of dexterous deception, would have realised that all they received back during the sessions is what they themselves put into the communication with me in the first place, and they would no longer be inclined to follow the injunctions I impart to them in an ancestral idiom, for them to reorganise their lives.

The divination session is demonstrably a valid source of knowledge in its own right. It is the recognition of previously undisclosed

yet verifiable and correct knowledge massively seeping through in my divination sessions, that convinces both my clients and myself that here we are onto something that we had better take seriously. And since mainstream North Atlantic science does not offer us a theoretical explanation for this phenomenon, we are forced to recognise *sangomahood* in its own right as a local body of (at least partially) valid procedures generating and implying knowledge about the natural and human order – a body that is not disqualified by its being at variance with the sensorialist premises of North Atlantic science, but on the contrary a reminder of the fact that there are demonstrable aspects of reality that simply happen not to be captured by North Atlantic science.

New Age<sup>14</sup> as an intellectual movement today abounds with centrifugal knowledge claims of a similar nature, as it also abounds with ordinary, average-educated people prepared to take such claims seriously in their lives. There are now many hundreds of thousands of adult inhabitants of the North Atlantic region alone, who as clients or practitioners, or both, engage in any of the hundreds of forms of divination available, from *I Ching* and runic divination to tarot, the Zulu bones oracle, and Native American varieties, with astrology in its many variations as the most widespread and most constant basic form; after a century of decline, astrology has made a major comeback in the North Atlantic since the late nineteenth century CE onwards. A growing number of these methods have been standardised, formalised, often re-invented,<sup>15</sup> and via compendia, manuals, and practical kits have made their way into New Age shops and onto Internet sites. While this creates a platform and a market for such

divinatory practices, their popularisation and commercialisation makes them admittedly more rather than less suspect – and for decades now scientifically inclined Sceptics (brandishing this capitalised epithet as a badge of honour) have been rallying around journals and, more recently, Internet sites to have such divinatory practices exposed as either fraudulent or mere childish mystifications.<sup>16</sup> The Sceptics' intransigence is understandable: these divinatory practices seem to imply a rejection of the very foundations of modern science,<sup>17</sup> for they are claimed by their supporters to produce independently (either always, or only under specific circumstances, for example in the hands of trained practitioners working for believers) valid knowledge through extrasensory means.

A claim like this does not have to be dismissed on the ground of principles alone; in fact, that type of dismissal would be rather unscientific because the established scientific principles of today are sure to be the obsolete views to be discarded tomorrow. The divinatory knowledge claim is in principle suited for empirical testing, notably by the science of parapsychology. This discipline's voluminous body of empirical research<sup>18</sup> has created solid evidence for the existence of telepathy and psychokinesis – convincing that is, by statistical standards (for example experimental designs and levels of

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bok *et al.* 1975; Frazier 1991, 1998; Hines 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Duran 1982: 196:

‘The field of paranormal research in general (...) calls for philosophical examination precisely because some paranormal claims seem to clash with our twentieth-century presuppositions about reality.’

This view is however not universally endorsed; e.g. the prominent French physicist Costa de Beauregard (1991) sees complete compatibility between physics and the kind of phenomena studied by parapsychology. Also cf. Bierman *et al.* 1991; Josephson & Viras 1991; Radin & Nelson 1989; Bierman 1993. All of these are high-ranking professional physicists.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Irwin 1999; Cardena *et al.* 2000.

significance) generally accepted in other fields of the social sciences, especially experimental psychology. It is typical of the scientistic climate throughout the twentieth century in the North Atlantic region that parapsychology is yet often considered a playground for methodologically and philosophically suspect obscurantism, whose empirical findings as to the existence of telepathy and psychokinesis are simply ignored or denied.

A well-known author on a crusade against scientism is Feyerabend. One is reminded of his caustic critique of a group of nearly 200 prominent scientists, who felt they could confidently sign a declaration<sup>19</sup> against astrology without knowing enough about the topic to realise that their declaration was seriously misrepresenting it:

‘..scientists quite often just don’t know what they are talking about. They have strong opinions, they know some standard arguments for these opinions, they may even know some results outside the particular field in which they are doing research but most of the time they depend, and have to depend (because of specialization) on *gossip* and *rumours*. No special intelligence, no technical knowledge is needed to find this out. Anyone with some perseverance can make the discovery and he will then also find that many of the rumours that are presented with such assurance are nothing but simple mistakes’.<sup>20</sup>

Elsewhere Feyerabend paraphrases Comte as arguing<sup>21</sup> that a disadvantage of the scientific revolution has been that it has made us completely disregard any connections between human life and the solar system, instead of continuing to study further such connections as were recognised by astrology but apparently for the wrong reasons – reasons which the scientific revolution has helped us to identify as obsolete. The case of astrology is adopted by Feyerabend as emblematic for his rebellious brand of the philosophy of science. No doubt in order to

shock serious modern minds, on the cover of both of his books cited above, the diagram of his birth horoscope accompanies his photograph as if to make any further, discursively formulated, bibliographical information superfluous. Regrettably he withholds from astrologically uninitiated readers (a majority) an explicit analysis of this birth chart, which if provided would have cast some ironic light (albeit only stellar, and pseudo-scientific, of course) on fundamental characteristics of his writing: methodological homelessness (cf. no planet in the first house), an agile relativism (cf. Mercury in conjunction with the Sun in the fourth house) and the aggressive urge (cf. strongest possible Mars, in exultation) to be victorious in debate (cf. strongest possible Jupiter, likewise in exultation) ... .

However, Feyerabend represents a minority option. In philosophy, a major exponent of the dismissive trend is Antony Flew, who in an influential article sums up what was already an hypercritical and incorrect view of parapsychology in the early 1980s and what can certainly not be considered true today: parapsychology, he alleges, cannot boast a single repeatable experiment, nor an

‘even half-way plausible theory with which to account for the materials it [parapsychology] is supposed to explain ...’<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, decades earlier the potential of parapsychology for philosophy was widely recognised by such continental philosophers as Driesch and Heymans,<sup>23</sup> and also in Anglo-Saxon contexts, where Broad outlined the four limiting basic principles that have since often formed the point of departure in philosophical approaches to

<sup>19</sup> Bok *et al.* 1975.

<sup>20</sup> Feyerabend 1978: 89; *italics original*.

<sup>21</sup> Feyerabend 1975: 100n 1; Comte (1830-1842, III: 273-280).

<sup>22</sup> Flew 1982: 180, 189; cf. 1987. Meanwhile, for an example of an excellent meta-analysis of a parapsychological project, cf. Honorton 1985. Also cf. Bierman *et al.* 1991. Towards the end of the present chapter we shall encounter examples of plausible theories which exist now but not, admittedly, when Flew first wrote, in 1982.

<sup>23</sup> Driesch 1932; Heymans 1913.

parapsychology. According to Broad, we can only speak of causality if we have some identifiable causal chain; the only way for the mind to work upon matter is in producing states in the brain; no mind without brain, hence the impenetrability of different minds: they are attached to different brains; and finally the tenet of sensorialism (no valid knowledge claims unless by reference to a causal chain involving the senses).<sup>24</sup>

### *5. Do the oracular pronouncements constitute knowledge in the technical epistemological sense?*

The phenomena which parapsychology studies touch on all central topics in philosophical enquiry: the nature of man and the universe, of mind, time, space, causality, knowledge, truth, God – and, as we shall see in the present chapter, interculturality. Broad's principles introduce a theme that has since been recurrent in philosophical approaches to the subject:<sup>25</sup> can information gained by extrasensory means properly be called 'knowledge'?

If we define knowledge, traditionally, as 'justified true belief', the claim that the *sangoma* oracle is an independent source of valid knowledge is problematic. In Duran's succinct but non-controversial formulation:

'A person can be said to know that p if and only if: (i) p is true; (ii) p is believed; and (iii) adequate evidence for p is had.'<sup>26</sup>

Although she does not fail to acknowledge that certainly since Gettier this is no longer state-of-the art epistemology,<sup>27</sup> her formulation raises enough problems for our present purpose. If the *sangoma* oracle is to possess the characteristics I claim for it, in terms of Duran's expression this means that the following criteria are to be met:

<sup>24</sup> Broad 1949.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Flew 1982: 181, and especially Duran 1982 on which the next paragraph is based.

<sup>26</sup> Duran 1982: 202.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Gettier 1963; Moser 1993.

- (i) its statements are true;
- (ii) the diviner believes them to be true; and
- (iii) the diviner has adequate evidence for them.

I choose the diviner, and not the client, as the most obvious human agent claimed to have knowledge, i.e. justified true belief; the diviner's pronouncements are subsequently imparted to the client, and there the same three criteria could be applied, but I take it that the client's knowing is only secondarily derived from the diviner's, and therefore does not centrally concern us here. For the diviner as the knowing subject we now have to ascertain if the three criteria are met.

If the client is present during the session, the *truth of certain oracular statements* may be more or less verified on the spot, for example whether the client has a twin, whether that twin is of the female gender, etc. But such verification may be tricky: what if, for instance, the divination session brings up a twin who died at birth and of which only the birth attendant, mother, etc. may know without the client ever having been told? Then the statement assigning a twin to the client would still be true, as might be ascertained later from hospital records, etc., although it would be rejected as false by the client during the session. Of course, it is the oracular statement's intrinsic truth, not the client's agreement, that we are after here. Within and outside the context of divination sessions, many if not most human statements cannot be immediately nor exhaustively verified in the same situation in which they are made. But whether ascertained on the spot or at some later moment in time and outside the divination session, it is not the truth of the oracular statements that poses the greatest difficulty. The oracle's statements come in two kinds: those referring to empirical natural conditions ('the client has a twin'), and those referring to the client's dealing with the ancestral world which –

whatever the diviner's and the client's beliefs on this point – has no unequivocal or direct impact on the world of the senses. Incidentally, this distinction between empirical and non-empirical references of oracular statements, although useful for developing an epistemological argument, reminds us that at this point we have completely resigned ourselves to an *etic* position, without the slightest attempt of adopting, *emically*, the point of view of the *sangoma* and his client: they may believe in the ancestors as a continuous part of everyday reality, manifesting themselves there in, what are to them, significant and non-problematic ways – they would be surprised, and unconvinced, when told that these ways may not be amenable to empirical demonstration by North Atlantic scientific means. The claims that the *sangoma* oracle independently produces verifiable empirical knowledge cannot refer to the ancestral world, for that claim is meant for a North Atlantic scientific audience, it is analytical, *etic*, and can only be substantiated by methods endorsed by North Atlantic science. So what remains to be verified under criterion (i) are the oracular statements referring to empirical conditions, and such verification is non-problematic although it may involve some work if the session is about distant clients previously unknown to the diviner. Further we have to decide whether, in order to pass criterion (i),

- (a) all empirical statements that the oracle produces need to be true, or
- (b) only a significantly greater number than could be expected on the basis of chance.

I suggest that (b) would be enough to substantiate my claim in so far as criteria (i) is concerned, but below we shall see that the oracle's performance for empirical statements tends even towards (a).

The next criterion to be assessed is *whether the diviner believes the empirical statements as produced by the oracle to be*

*true*. In the course of the session the diviner produces a sustained narrative explaining the client's predicament and possible redress in ancestral terms (often mixed with witchcraft terms). This narrative gradually develops: it is strung together, step by step, from the successive specific interpretations which the diviner attaches to each throw, i.e. each combination that comes up after a particular throw, interpreted also in the light of a peripheral counter that can take not 16 but only 2 different values ('open' or 'closed'). Before the session the diviner prepares by putting on his sacred beaded necklaces, each of them associated with a particular substantial sacrifice in the past, by specific prayers, and by offering libations or snuff offerings to the ancestors. The consultation of the oracle is conducted in a particular state of consciousness meant to open the diviner's mind to any extrasensory information that may come across, but at the same time the diviner knows to be responsible for the weaving of the narrative, for the articulate throw-by-throw interpretation of each combination as it comes up, and for formulating the next question before each successive throw. Every combination is interpreted along about eight different dimensions, and the diviner has to choose the dimension that fits best in the ongoing narrative – unless he decides (as may typically happen in the early stages of the session, after half a dozen throws) that the combination that has just come up demonstrates that the incipient narrative developed so far was spurious and needs to be replaced by a more fitting one. Aware of the very different (often radically opposed) meanings which a particular combination may have under the eight dimensions, the diviner makes a choice which, while deliberate and usually taking into account the evolving narrative so far, yet needs to present itself to the diviner as the most obvious, or the only possible choice. In other words, in the awareness of alternatives the diviner produces that meaning for a

particular throw that he considers to be truer than any other of the alternatives. Therefore, the statement that is finally made as the interpretation of that particular throw is believed to be true by the diviner, but at the same time he is aware of being himself the instrument in the construction of that truth, and of having had a certain freedom in that construction. That construction is pronounced in good faith, although often with considerable anxiety: the diviner knows this statement to be the truest that could be produced under the circumstances, but – like any diviner, and like most clients and observers – he is also aware of the fact that throughout history, and across divination techniques, many oracular statements have been known to be only partially true, or to be false. Particularly in face-to-face sessions, where the statements are produced once and for all and cannot be reviewed retrospectively in the light of the subsequent part of the session, this produces an almost unbearable stress in some diviners – including myself. My stress does not only spring from the realisation that the client has already secure knowledge of the biographical details I am only trying to divine (and thus could call my bluff at any moment!), and not only from the distress which the emphatic exposure to the client's personal history imparts on me, but also from the fact that long before I became a diviner I was an empirical scientist with expertise in statistics and probability theory; while I know it to be my role to produce true oracular statements, I am often surprised to find out, later, that that is precisely what I did during a session – I am generally aware that my statements might be wrong, although some hunches carry such a lapidary sense of conviction that they appear as utterly true when I pronounce them to the client. I submit that criterion (ii) has been met albeit in a peculiar dynamic fashion. The diviner believes the oracular statements to be true in the same manner as an author in an empirical discipline (history, anthropology) believes his texts to be true:

also there the contents of the statement do not appear before the knower in a finished state for him to believe or disbelieve, but they are constructed by himself, and in the optionality of that construction the struggle for truth competes with the awareness of alternatives.

A further problem crops up here: apart from the compositional systematics of the evolving narrative (which in itself could be expected to yield elegance, but not truth), what other clues does the diviner have to decide for one dimension rather than for another, and to apply that dimension in a specific way in order to arrive at the final interpretation of that particular throw? Already half a century ago, Ducasse, on the basis of Louisa Rhine's survey of 3000 cases, called attention to the fact that in cases of spontaneous precognition or contemporaneous extrasensory cognition across a distance, the veridical or illusory nature of such a impression usually appeared not to be marked as such in the consciousness of the subject; the subject allegedly did not experience the veridical, factual images differently from the illusory, spurious ones.<sup>28</sup> The finding surprises me in the light of numerous other reports in which subjects were greatly moved by visions and dreams involving their beloved, and which somehow they were convinced to be true.<sup>29</sup> If the diviner knows himself to take an active part in the production of the meaning of a combination (given the eight dimensions, and the evolving narrative), how can he sufficiently reduce that awareness of actively and freely constructing, and perceive one alternative to be truer than all others? All I can say is that in the sessions I cultivate a receptive state of mind in which I try to open myself up to what appears to be 'selecting in me', 'articulating in me' – and this state of mind (a very light trance, perhaps) is not different from how I write poetry, and scientific prose, or how I lecture, or engage

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<sup>28</sup> Ducasse 1954.

<sup>29</sup> Tenhaeff 1980.

in an intensive conversation outside sessions. During the oracular sessions there are one type of interpretations that have the hallmark of truth and are invariably preferred by me over alternatives: those that are at first sight so weird, so unexpected, yet so strangely compelling, that I simply do not stop to doubt their being inspired and true.

Finally: is the diviner's belief in the oracular statements he produces justified belief in the sense that he has adequate evidence for them? Of course, such justification has only secondarily to do with the subsequent verification of the statement as under criterion (i) – regardless of whether the oracular statement proves ultimately true or false, the justification for belief in its truth has to be available in the situation at hand. The evidence at the diviner's disposal is composed of

- (a) the client's initial intake statement,
- (b) the oracular catalogue's inner symbolism and associational structure, and, most importantly,
- (c) the successive specific fall of the tablets in response to specific questions instigated by the client's intake statement.

This is all. From an external, *etic* perspective, within mainstream North Atlantic sensorialist epistemology in which this argument triggered by Duran is being developed, we are persuaded to assume that the random generator involved (i.e. shuffling and throwing of physical tablets, or using a subroutine on the computer) works independently of the diviner's, the client's, or any other mind, and that it blindly produces combinations without in any way taking into account such information as the world at large may contain about this client. From this perspective, in other words, the evidence for the truth of the oracular statements cannot be considered adequate.

But again we must realise that the crux of the problem is that we are operating, in this

argument, at the borderline between North Atlantic epistemology and *sangoma* science. For the Southern African *sangoma* the answer is simple. The oracle is the means by which the ancestors manifest themselves in the world of the living; the *sangoma* is the elected representative (incarnation, even) of the ancestors among the living; the *sangoma* is trained to read the oracle correctly and has added to his initial training by years of experience; and for all these various reasons the *sangoma*'s belief in the truth of the oracular statements is certainly justified and will be supported by others sharing his socio-cultural environment.

For the North Atlantic *sangoma* who at the same time is an empirical scientist and a professor of philosophy the answer is, alas, less straightforward. The ancestral beliefs are implied in his role as *sangoma*; but how completely absorbed can he be in that role if in his other professional capacities he is tempted to deconstruct the concept of 'ancestor' as an idiom to speak of power relations, social control, intra-kin hierarchy, sociability, a web of causality and information encompassing the whole of nature and all past conditions that have gone into producing the present client with his particular predicaments, etc.? By ritual preparation I make sure my *sangoma* role is reinforced before the onset of the session, and a boundary is erected between being the *sangoma* and being the North Atlantic academic; yet even during the session the alternatives to the ancestral interpretation cannot completely be locked out and are likely to seep through that boundary. I find myself occasionally reaching for psychoanalytical and Jungian interpretative models if these seem to apply to the evolving narrative about the client. I find myself applying common-sense knowledge and deduction, for instance, when it comes to deducing whether a client could or could not be responsible for a particular pregnancy in view of his whereabouts at the time of conception. On the other hand, present

oracular readings exist against the background of the diviner's previous experiences with the oracle, and if the latter is known to have consistently produced correct empirical statements in the past, this in itself forms a justification for a belief in the truth of the present statement. I take it that criterion (iii) is met, albeit with difficulty, in the same dynamic and internally tensioned way as criterion (ii).

So I am not sending the reader on a fool's errand, after all: the *sangoma* oracle can be held to produce *knowledge*, and the claim that it does so independently, and correctly, is meaningful, although it remains to be substantiated throughout the remainder of this chapter's argument.

Meanwhile, however, our discussion has hinted at a condition we were not quite prepared for. What we have demonstrated, in passing, is the difficulty of rendering the concept of knowledge meaningful in an intercultural situation that involves more than one cultural orientation: statements that undoubtedly constitute knowledge from the point of view of Southern African *sangomahood*, require sleight-of-hand, or a stretch of the imagination, to be made to constitute knowledge under North Atlantic epistemology – and yet the latter constitutes (as I shall argue below, on formal and historical grounds) an intellectual specialism well comparable to *sangomahood*. Are we forced to conclude that intercultural knowledge is a contradiction in itself – because true knowledge can only exist within one culturally constructed life-world? Such a question would move us outside the present argument, but it needs to be pursued at some other time. Let us return to parapsychology.

## 6. *The sangoma oracle as a source of valid knowledge about the world of the senses*

In the course of the twentieth century, parapsychology has produced a voluminous body of (often) rigorous and (often)

quantitative evidence for the existence (albeit marginally, and surrounded by a lot of bigotry and fraud)<sup>30</sup> of telepathy and psychokinesis.<sup>31</sup> Specific studies have been undertaken concerning the empirical validity, if any, of established divinatory methods, notably astrology.<sup>32</sup> The evidence in favour of astrology brought forward in those studies is puzzling and contradictory, but too substantial to be dismissed off-hand.

But even if the astrologers may have a smattering of right on their side, the theories they have advanced since Antiquity in order to explain their specific findings are in themselves problematic. How is it to be believed that specific relatively small sectors of the heavens (zodiacal signs), planets and fixed stars, once named after an obsolete and culturally specific system of animal symbolism and mythology but now (due to precession and scientific redefinition)<sup>33</sup> drifted far away from the places originally associated with named Near Eastern, Egyptian and Hellenic constellations, could

<sup>30</sup> Rhine 1975; another notorious case of fraud, involving S.G. Soal and a University of London doctorate, is cited in Flew 1982: 179.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. Grattan-Guinness 1982; Angoff & Barth 1974; Long 1977; Murphy 1961; Rhine & Pratt 1972; Hansel 1980; Kelly & Locke 1981; Rhine & Rhine 1943; Ludwig 1978; Eysenck & Sargent 1982; Edge *et al.* 1986; Wolman 1985; Tenhaeff 1958, 1980.

<sup>32</sup> Jung 1972; von Franz 1980; Eysenck & Nias 1982; Toonder & West 1970; and see particularly the work by the Gauquelins, cited below. For a reliable critical assessment of these defences of astrology, cf. Kelly 1982, who explains with an appeal to normal psychology why astrology so often seems to 'have a point' without any special effect from the heavens being involved; yet also Kelly has to concede that undeniable evidence partly supports the basic tenet of astrology.

<sup>33</sup> Precession is the phenomenon of the progressive movement of the vernal point (the moment that night and day have the same duration) across the zodiac in the course of millennia, due to the fact that in addition to diurnal rotation the ends of the earth's axis describe a slow circular movement, like that of a top's. In modern times, the constellations were fixed scientifically so as to cover, together, the entire heaven, often in ways deviating from the ancient constellations.

have a systematic and detectable influence on people who happen to be born whenever those sectors occupy a particular position in the heavens and whenever some of the major bodies in our solar system (the sun, the planets, and the earth's main satellite, the moon) as seen from earth appear to be projected in certain ephemeral positions against these sectors?

But although until recently no plausible theory had been advanced concerning the physical mechanism that could be involved as the causal chain linking celestial and earthly phenomena, very comprehensive statistical analyses by the Gauquelins, while playing havoc with most traditional astrological correlations between birth horoscope and personal traits, yet detected, in the birth horoscopes of major professional groups (athletes, soldiers, statesmen, artists, etc.), amazing regularities reminiscent of astrology.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, with the advances in geophysics and astrophysics over the past decades, plausible models have been formulated in terms of interplanetary magnetism, occlusion of these influences by the earth or the moon, reinforcement or diminishment of these effects when the major bodies in our solar system make a particular angle vis-à-vis one another – the very angles that feature in the astrological theory of aspects which dates back to Late Antiquity.

Feyerabend refers to extensive work already available in the mid-1970s, indicating that extraterrestrial effects on terrestrial phenomena, including living organisms, are demonstrable with standard scientific methods.<sup>35</sup> In the quarter of a century that has elapsed since, this literature has steadily grown.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Kelly 1982; F. Gauquelin 1980; M. Gauquelin 1969, 1970, 1973; Gauquelin & Gauquelin 1977-1978. The Gauquelins have perfected a line of research that has a much longer history, e.g. Flambard 1908, 1913; Choisnard 1924.

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Watson 1973; Mitchell 1974; Piccardi 1962.

<sup>36</sup> Particularly impressive is: Seymour 1988; Seymour has a Ph.D. in astronomy.

However, the rest of my argument in this chapter, concerning the detailed analysis of the *sangoma* oracle, suggests that those wishing to prove the objective correctness of astrological pronouncements may be right, but only for the wrong reasons.

If astrological, or any other, divinatory procedures ever produce valid knowledge, it may well be because the diviner, initially confronted with a complex and contradictory pattern (such as the mathematical analysis of a birth horoscope, with all the different angles which the planets can assume vis-à-vis each other, in so many different positions of exaltation or decadence, in so many different houses and signs), is forced to make interpretational choices that, although they apparently spring from established, impersonal, intersubjective, time-honoured divinatory (for example astrological) procedure, *in fact are largely at his own discretion*. If he makes the right choices, it is because the pattern's throbbing (the association with drums is deliberate – they too produce an altered state of consciousness) complexity invites him to open up to extrasensory information.

If this hypothesis is correct (it reflects my personal experience when successfully trying my hand at astrological divination as distinct from geomancy), astrology – despite its enormous elaboration as a mathematico-astronomical technique – yet works (in the positive sense of: may yet produce valid knowledge) on the same principles as mirror-gazing, the inspection of tea leaves and coffee dregs, the reading of cracks in a wall or in the soil, and cleromancy, including the *sangoma* oracle.

Under such models the basic idea of astrology may yet be salvaged to some extent, even if modern science cannot give support to the complex and detailed specificities of astrological calculational procedure. This basic idea can be summarised in four words:

‘As above, so below’.

This is the famous Hermetic adage, which first reached Western Europe in the Middle Ages in Roger Bacon's Latin translation as:

- ' 2. *Quod inferior superioribus et superiora inferioribus respondent.*  
*Quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius, et quod est superius est sicut est inferius.*  
*Quodcunque inferius est simile est ejus quod est superius.*  
*Inferiora hac cum superioribus illis, istaque cum iis vuicissim veres sociant.'*

Although *sangoma* divination has, among others, a detectable astrological background in 'Abāssid Iraq around the turn of the second millennium CE,<sup>38</sup> the symbolic correspondences attaching to the sixteen different combinations which that divination system's four distinctively marked tablets can assume when thrown randomly, no longer carry any overt astrological signature in the consciousness of the diviners using that system. So *sangoma* divination is different from astrology, and the empirical parapsychological studies on the very partial vindication of astrology cannot help us to claim, or disclaim, the validity of *sangoma* divination as a machine to generate valid knowledge independently. Neither have I statistical data on *sangoma* divination at my disposal: although the electronic methods to which I have resorted in the last few years do

<sup>37</sup> Bacon 1920: xlix. Although there is no evidence that Heraclitus engaged in astrology, this saying appears to echo a saying attributed to that presocratic philosopher:

'the way up and the way down are one and the same'

(Tester 1989: 217; Tester does not provide a source for the Heraclitus quotation, which however derives from Hippolytus, *Refutatio*, ix, 9, Diels 22, B, 60; cf. Diels & Kranz 1951; de Raedemaeker 1953: 134). Flourishing in the early third century CE, Hippolytus may well have undergone Hermetic influence which thus may have come to be subsequently projected, across more than half a millennium, onto Heraclitus. A similar corruption in the Heraclitic corpus was recently claimed in relation with an even more important fragment, no. 50, the only one in which he is traditionally claimed to use the word *logos* (Vergeer 2000: 306f).

<sup>38</sup> Van Binsbergen, 1996e, 1996c.

produce a detailed protocol for each session, the task of probing into the truth or untruth of the many statements made during one session alone would already be a substantial task, let alone if I could have done this for a sufficient number of sessions to warrant statistical analysis.

The aim of *sangoma* divination is primarily therapeutic: to reinsert the client in what may be argued to be her or his proper place in the universe, so that the life force in principle available for that person but temporarily blocked by their drifting away from the proper place, can flow once more. Under such assumptions, turning the divination session into an experiment to find out the validity of the knowledge it produces could harm clients in their spiritual and therapeutic pursuits, and alienate them.

However, in one recent case I have been fortunate to be able to collect all relevant information needed to assess the veracity of at least one particular *sangoma* session.<sup>39</sup> The case—involves an enthusiastic and impressed client of mature age and with a prior disappointing experience of initiation into West African diviner status as offered to him in his hometown (a major European city). The session was conducted on the basis of the minimum information provided on his electronic intake form, and, in the absence of this client, who before I received his intake form had been a total stranger to me. The results of this analysis are listed at length in Table 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Sangoma* consultation intake form submitted in June, 2002; name and address and other personal details of the client now known to me but not given here for reasons of privacy protection. I have sought the client's permission to deposit, under embargo, the true details of this case for safe-keeping and future reference and verification. I solemnly declare that (apart from the use of pseudonyms) the true facts of the case are presented here, to the best of my ability, without deliberate additions or distortions that would unfairly strengthen my argument.

|    | I: INTAKE  | II: SESSION  | III: CLIENT'S SPONTANEOUS FEEDBACK  | IV: CLIENT'S SOLICITED FEEDBACK  |
|----|--|--|---|--|
|    | Concrete information provided by client on my website's electronic intake form prior to the session  | Concrete information coming up during the session and recorded in the session's protocol <sup>40</sup> | Client's subsequent (post-session) spontaneous, unsolicited confirmation or rejection <sup>41</sup> | Client's subsequent (post-session) solicited confirmation or rejection <sup>42</sup>   |
| 0  | date of electronic submission, and client's stated main question: 'My principal question is how can I utilise the spirits of my ancestors in a meaningful spiritual way, to help and heal others?' |  |   |  |
| 1  | client's mother's name and whether she is still alive  | '...the elderly woman, the mother probably, staying alone in the house ...'                            | spontaneously confirmed: client's mother is still alive, a widow since 1997                         | confirmed: 'This accurately describes my mother, a restless soul who does not like being alone, but has moved recently from relative opulence to a place that can best be described as adding to her loneliness. She does have a dog, however!'  |
| 2a | client's father's name but not whether he is still alive   | '...it looks as if father is still alive but lives with another, younger woman ...'                    | rejected: client's father died in 1997  | rejected but also confirmed up to a point. [In later correspondence I suggested to the client that from an ancestral perspective, this factually incorrect reading might yet be read as revealing a glimpse of the father's present condition in the afterlife:] 'This cannot obviously be objectively verified. Although he is dead, he did have a lost love of his life and was also generally treated with a certain contempt by his family. So, the implications seem accurate to me.' |
| 2b |  | '...and is antagonistic with the son ...'  |   | rejected: 'I would say this is not true, and in general – and interestingly – the oracle reading was not in tune with the role of the father in my life. He was a very passive and withdrawn individual bossed around by my mother.'   |
| 3a |  | '...there are indications that there is something missing in client's family life ...'                 |   | confirmed: 'The something missing is an accurate distillation of some essential emotional challenge. It is borne out by what follows. Family life – I have been divorced twice and only one of my three kids actually lives with me, and that only recently.'  |

<sup>40</sup> Column II presents an *exhaustive* list of all items of concrete information which came up during the *sangoma* divination session. As the reader can easily ascertain for himself by an inspection of column I, practically none of this information could in any way be derived from the data as provided on the electronic intake form.

<sup>41</sup> In column III only those confirmations or rejections have been given which were contained in the client's spontaneous, unsolicited reactions to the protocol via e-mail, i.e. immediately after the oracular session had taken place in the absence of the client and the result had been written out and sent to him by e-mail.

<sup>42</sup> In this column IV, phrases between quotation marks literally (though with some minimal editing) reproduce the client's solicited written feedback via e-mail upon the text in columns II- III.

|    |  |   |  |  |
|----|--|---|--|--|
|    |  |   |  | So family life was missing, a huge ten-year chunk out of my life.'   |
| 3b |  | '...and sex life, or that he has a sexually transmitted disease, perhaps AIDS ...'  |  | rejected: 'No sexual diseases and certainly not AIDS, so that was not appropriate.'  |
| 4a |  | '...client has a twin ...'  | confirmed: client has a twin sibling                         | confirmed: 'Yes, this was and is accurate.'  |
| 4b |  | '...sister ...'   | rejected: client's twin sibling is male; but see cell IV: 4b | wrong yet partially confirmed: '...as Fatima <sup>43</sup> [client's partner] keeps dreaming that my brother is bisexual, this subsequent reference to "sister" is a more revelatory observation than it would first seem.'                          |
| 5  |  | '...client's relationship with his twin sibling is characterised by rivalry specifically over the mother's affection; in this rivalry the sibling has the upper hand ...' |  | confirmed: 'Another impressive and sharp observation although the rivalry for affection in the adult life, at least, has long since given way to a distance from my part to both my mother and brother (I have one other brother too).'              |
| 6  |  | '...client does not get from his sibling and/or mother what he aspires to most ...'   |  | largely confirmed : 'This may well be true on a profound level of the psyche, but in my adult life I have moved on from this lack, and built a life without the desperate need for maternal love. But, as a deep truth, I would say it is accurate.' |
| 7a |  | '...client lost a lover, or was unable to develop a love relationship, ...'   |  | confirmed: 'I have been divorced twice and had many partners... but as each relationship has ended I guess this proves the point.'   |
| 7b |  | '...because his life was being overshadowed by his mother (...) and sibling ...'  |  | confirmed: 'Not for me to judge, but I would accept this as feeling right.'  |
| 8  |  | '...the father has also been an important factor [in the loss of the beloved] ...'  |  | rejected, see cell IV: 2b  |

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<sup>43</sup> A pseudonym.

|     |   |  |   |   |
|-----|---|--|---|---|
| 9a  |   | ‘...client’s predicament really appears to lie in the shining attraction of a new partner <sup>44</sup> ...’ | confirmed: ‘I have started a new relationship with a loving but difficult partner, very spiritual based, and she has very strong healing abilities, too. So that makes sense.’  | confirmed: ‘Yes, this does very well describe the new relationship. A reading done by the Tigrean <sup>45</sup> sangoma <sup>46</sup> said a star was over our heads for the relationship, so shining attraction fits in well with this.’   |
| 9b  | client’s surname, postal address, e-mail address, country and community of birth and of ‘home’ (may be interpreted by the client as ‘present residence’ or as ‘original ethnic home, origin’) | ‘...from outside his family ...’   | confirmed: client’s family is autochthonous Western European White, the now partner is Black and from the African country of Tigre <sup>47</sup>  |   |
| 9c  |   | ‘...no matter how treacherous and expensive she is ...’  | phrasing too strong, but still: ‘a loving but difficult partner’  | largely but not totally rejected: ‘Treacherous or expensive does not quite hit the spot, though. But events may prove otherwise. I think, however, in her life that F[atima; the new partner] has proven very loyal indeed. Let’s see how this develops. Secretive too – as in her “secret” consultation with you.’ <sup>48</sup> |
| 10  |   | ‘...the new partner’s name is associated with the tiger, <sup>49</sup> e.g. Tiger, Stripe, Leopard, etc ...’ | confirmed: the girlfriend is from Tigre; moreover, in that country her great grandmother was the local head of a cultic society in which tiger imagery and paraphernalia probably played a major role; later information revealed that ancestors on the girlfriend’s paternal side held similar offices | confirmed: ‘Absolutely, and she also has the qualities of a tigress, too.’  |
| 11a |   | ‘...the tiger association is perhaps rather with the girl’s/partner’s mother ...’                            | confirmed by client: the girlfriend’s mother is also from Tigre, and it is her grandmother who is   | confirmed: ‘No further comments on this. Her father was in fact minister in the Tigrean government, so obviously a strong Tigrean   |

<sup>44</sup> The new partner’s gender was not disclosed, in other words there was no evidence during the session that the relationship is heterosexual; subsequently the client spontaneously sent comments on the protocol, and a picture, confirming that it was.

<sup>45</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>46</sup> The country of ‘Tigre’ is not situated in Southern Africa, and the word *sangoma* has no currency there. The client, conscious of addressing someone who identifies as a *sangoma*, applies the term *sangoma* in a generic sense of ‘diviner-priest’.

<sup>47</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>48</sup> A few days after I was approached by the present client, his partner approached me independently, asking for a consultation.

<sup>49</sup> The identity of the animal species in question has been altered so as to protect the client’s identity; the pseudonyms ‘tiger’ and ‘Tigre’ adequately mimic the original semantic and phonetic relationships. The substitution has its limits, though: there are no tigers (*Panthera tigris*) in Africa; as we will discuss *ad nauseam* in chapter 8, other large feline species have a distribution in both Asia and Africa: *Panthera leo* (lion) and *Panthera pardus* (panther, leopard – the two names are no longer distinguished taxonomically; the cheetah however (a spotted feline with a dog-like body and a very small head) is counted as a different species: *Acinonyx jubatus*). Cf. Wendt 1974; Grzimek 1974; Whitfield 1984.

|     |  |  | indicated in cell III: 10   | connection still.'  |
|-----|--|--|---|---|
| 11b |  | '...or possibly (but improbably) with client's own mother ...'   | most probably to be rejected: there is no tiger association in client's mother's first given name, but the matter has not been explored beyond that   |   |
| 12  |  | '...the girlfriend/partner will assist client on his spiritual path ...'   | client notes a striking coincidence: his girlfriend already engages in forms of divination and healing; cf. client's comment in cell III: 9a  | confirmed: 'Yes this feels absolutely right and has already happened'.  |
| 13a | background to main question as provided by client on electronic intake form: 'Last year, a "bundle" was placed in me by the spirits of the ancestors in a shamanic ceremony in Paris, France. <sup>50</sup> I have dismissed the whole thing, but here I am on your site.' <sup>51</sup> | in summary: client wanted 'only too eagerly' to establish contact with his ancestors during this session last year         | the point of eagerness was initially rejected by the client's reference to his dismissive attitude: see column I: 13a. However, not only was the dismissal followed by renewed occult interest for which I was approached as a sangoma; also the client later admitted (cell IV 13a-b) that his initial attitude was perfectly described as 'eagerness' | confirmed: 'The eagerness, on a lot of reflection, may be a little harsh but fair. What it does bring on was my subsequent negative contact ...'; but admittedly the eagerness was already clear from the intake form (cell I: 13a)   |
| 13b |  | in summary: that earlier spiritual episode involved cheats and impostors   |   | confirmed: '...with an out and out impostor posing as an Orisha priest in Santeria, and a subsequent 'initiation' which really proved to be nothing. This was the eagerness and the folly it led to. I wanted to explore mediumship, as it had happened so strangely to me, and possession states. But I did it at the expense of common sense – and money.' This information was certainly not given with the intake form. |
| 14  |  | '...[client must] 'prepare a small shrine in the form of a large flat stone to be positioned somewhere near his house ...' | client notes a striking coincidence: 'We've just come back from [a holiday on the Isle of] Crete, bringing a big number of large flat stones! Interesting.'   | confirmed as a coincidence: 'Yes, Crete stones are a coincidence'.  |

Table 2. An exhaustive analysis of the information input and output of a *sangoma* divination session.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> As names of client's home city and country, these are pseudonyms.

<sup>51</sup> Sc. the website where my electronic *sangoma* consultation form is being made available.

<sup>52</sup> Phrases between quotation marks are literal quotations, with this proviso that in the protocol client's given name appears instead of the anonymous designation 'client', 'sister' has now been replaced by 'sibling' except the first time, and the actual place and country of residence have been obscured. '(..)' is a sign of editorial omission of text;

The conclusion is obvious: on the basis of a bare minimum of information scarcely going beyond name and address, the *sangoma* divination turns out to produce, in this case at least, and in the hands of this particular diviner, the most amazing details of correct biographical information, which could not possibly be derived from the minimum information offered at intake, yet was very largely confirmed by the client in two rounds of commentary:

- (a) once spontaneously, in enthusiastic response to the written protocol of the session conducted in his absence and in a different country, and subsequently deliberately solicited, in order to include in the analysis not only those items verified which the client had found most spectacular or had rejected explicitly, but also those items on which he had not spontaneously commented in the first round.

This detailed analysis establishes beyond doubt that, in this case and in my hands, *sangoma* divination is an independent source of valid empirical knowledge. As such it adds tremendously to the authority of the *sangoma*'s spiritual and psychological advice, which by virtue of the authority thus established often provides an otherwise utterly perplexed client with the Archimedean fixed point needed to lever his life onto a more positive course; and it also reinforces the *sangoma* himself in his own role and in a confident application of his skills, insights and intuitions.

## 7. Discussion

Let us now take a detailed look at the session excerpted in Table 2, in an attempt to

identify the mechanisms that allow the *sangoma* oracle to be an independent source of valid knowledge.

As always the point where things went wrong is the most instructive. When processing the client's intake form, I was under the impression that for reasons unknown to me, the form had not recorded the answer to the question whether client's father was still alive. The oracular session was conducted by me while I was consciously aware that I did not know whether the father was dead or still alive. Only when writing this analysis, two months later, did I find out what really happened: the electronic intake form was so constructed that only if a client checked the box for 'father still alive', the answer would be included in the data set subsequently to be submitted to me electronically. If the box was left unchecked, the line in question would not appear among the intake data, as in this client's case; and whereas I took this to mean 'no information for inexplicable reasons', in fact it meant 'father is dead'. When I asked the oracle whether the client's father was still alive, the combination that came up was:

*Ntakwala* , i.e. 'the daughter; the young woman; brilliance; money'.

However, the peripheral counter (a cowry shell) that was thrown simultaneously with the four tablets, came out closed, and hence I was persuaded to let *Ntakwala* be largely overshadowed by its converse where the tablets appear in opposite position:

*Vuba* (= 'mixed, ambiguous'): .

Therefore I was led to conclude that in some ambiguous manner the father might still be alive and involved with a young woman.

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'..' is not an indication of such omission but simply an indication that the recorded sentence continued across entries. Passages between brackets [] contain my own comments and summaries.

This reading, while factually incorrect from the perspective of the living, from an ancestral perspective could also be construed as revealing a glimpse of the father's present condition in the afterlife. In cell IV: 2a the client's agreement with such an interpretation is recorded. As so often in the *sangoma* oracular practice an inversion may be involved here. In the *sangoma* world view the condition of the ancestors is the opposite of that of the living, according to the adage accompanying the combination:

*Mpululu* (= 'ululating'):   
‘Bereavement in this world means happiness in the next’.

Hence, for example, *sangomas* administer at their shrines, take sacrificial snuff, etc. with their left hand, even though among the living the right hand is privileged by Southern African etiquette. As if to corroborate this reading in terms of inversion, in this session the next throw after *Ntakwala* was to yield *Mpululu*.<sup>53</sup> But on second thoughts the client's agreement with the diviner's vision of the father's comforts in the afterlife suggests a better way to interpret the ambiguity which the oracle stressed: in a way the father is still alive in the sense that because the son has throughout his life, and also after the father's death, identified with him (cf. Table 2, cell IV: 2b), the son's current new love may be said to reflect, and to compensate for, the lost love his father is known to have cherished while still alive. A typical *sangoma* interpretation would go even further and would consider the son to be possessed by his deceased father's spirit, who through the body of his living son tries to find the amorous satisfaction that was denied to him in his own life. But such a reading, which upon re-inspection of the protocol turns out to have been technically possible given the sequential fall of the

tablets, was not considered at all during the session.

Not spotting the son's consistent identification with the father as a (fellow-) victim of the mother, constituted this oracular session's major failure, although the antagonistic role of the mother did come out very well and was confirmed by the client. Perhaps my own autobiographical preoccupation with a sinister father has prevented me from correctly grasping the oracular message. That the client has no problem depicting the father in afterlife in a happy relationship with a younger woman while leaving the client's mother a desperately lonely widow, suggests that the client's eager search for spiritual and occult progress, enabling him to make contact with the ancestors, is but a continued attempt to reach the father, even though the latter is dead now. But while all this may be true at the conscious and subjective level, and while the father's being dead is a firm fact, yet the oracle's reading to the effect that the father has thwarted the son's love life may be vindicated at a more objective level. The role model of a hen-picked father may well have led the client's love relationships to shipwreck (which is what the oracle claims), even though consciously and subjectively the relationship with the father may appear to the son to have been far from antagonistic.

The fact that the oracle was unable to produce a proper reading on the father being alive or dead merely or largely because the diviner, being me, had misread the intake form, and has a hang-up about fathers anyway, clearly shows that at least in part the oracle's pronouncements are based on the conscious contents of the diviner's mind, and that these conscious contents may eclipse more correct information which, at the same time, is certainly available outside the diviner's mind: in the client's mind, in the minds of other people who have known the deceased, and in the universe at large, where every event and condition, if it is to be verifiable at all, necessarily leaves traces.

<sup>53</sup> Other examples of such inversion concern the gender of client's twin sibling (cf. Table 7.1, rows 4a and 4b), and the undisclosed gender of the client's new love, in the same Table.

Moreover, the correct information ('father is dead') was implied on the electronic intake form, which however was not available as an electronic document on the computer on which I did the consultation.

The above eclipsing effected by the diviner's conscious mind is undoubtedly one of the mechanisms involved in *sangoma* divination. However, most of the verifiably correct information produced in the session has to come from outside the diviner's conscious mind: in the latter, no previous knowledge of this utterly unknown client was available beyond the information contained on the intake form, and the probability of correctly guessing all the many objectively correct items of Table 2 is extremely small.

Let us press this point. Since one in every eighty births is of twins, the probability of correctly guessing – if guessing were involved – that an otherwise unknown client has a twin is one in eighty, i.e. 1.25%.<sup>54</sup> Incidentally, the probability of the client having a living twin is considerably smaller, for as the client's unknown age progresses, so does the chance that the twin is no longer alive, but that is not the point here. Since the word 'partner' can include any more or less exclusive and more or less sexual relationship of unspecified duration, and since having a partner is the social norm for adults, the probability of correctly guessing that a client, of unknown age but probably an adult who moreover by his given name is identifiable as male, would consider himself to have a partner, may be as high as 75%. Teenagers and very young adults (people likely to have first partners not qualifying to be called 'new' partners) only constitute about one quarter of the total age range of post-childhood males. Moreover male adults who have stuck to their first partner are known to form a minority in contemporary North Atlantic urban society, and so the probability of correctly guessing, under all these uncertain conditions, that the current

partner is not the first partner, while the partner qualifies as 'new' (even if that partner succeeded the predecessor years ago) could be estimated at about 65%. Thus the probability of correctly guessing, without any further information, that the client has both a twin and a new partner, is about

$$(0.0125)*(0.75)*(0.65),$$

or about 0.6%. In other words, if the outcome of the session on these points were merely due to chance, one would have to conduct more than 165 divination sessions in order to produce one and only one session with such an outcome. And this only accounts for three items of verifiable information, whereas Table 2 lists many more.

What then is this other source of information? Since I am using the client's conscious autobiographical knowledge as a control in Table 2, all post-session confirmation in columns III and IV comes from the client. Therefore, one obvious explanation for the correct information independently produced by the divination session is that the technique of *sangoma* divination gives the diviner access to the client's mind, enabling the former telepathically to pick the mind of the latter (whom the *sangoma* has never seen, who resides in another country, and the only contact with whom has been in the form of one short pre-coded intake form). The emphasis here is on the conscious layers of the client's mind, but occasionally also probing into the subconscious layers, as, for example, in the present case when filial resentment vis-à-vis the mother and strong sibling rivalry were correctly detected, but to the client's somewhat surprised agreement.

The attractiveness of this telepathic explanatory model, although strongly suggested by Table 2, may yet in itself be an artefact of the self-imposed censorship that has informed the construction of that table. For here, out of the much more extensive contents of the oracular protocol, deliberately only such objective items of

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<sup>54</sup> Anonymous 1975b.

knowledge have been selected as are amenable to empirical verification by means of sensory observation. With the exception of the reference to the flat stone from which an ancestral shrine is to be made, all references to ancestral injunction, ancestral wrath, witchcraft, prescribed rituals towards ancestral propitiation, etc. have been omitted from the table because, pertaining to a discourse that would obviously not have currency in North Atlantic scientific circles, it would be beside the point of demonstrating the *sangoma* oracle's independent production of empirically valid knowledge.

If an appeal to telepathy in this connection is permissible, I submit that the same could be said for psychokinesis. There is now a substantial body of evidence to the effect that natural processes can be subtly influenced by the human mind, albeit only in infinitesimally subtle ways. Already over a decade ago an authoritative physics journal cited more than 800 published professional references dealing with this effect.<sup>55</sup> During virtually every real-life divination session using real tablets, I have the impression, once or twice in the succession of throws, of actively producing that particular fall of the tablets that would be most appropriate and easiest to interpret at that point in the unfolding narrative; yet before each throw the tablets are carefully shuffled in my two hands cupped together, and to the best of my awareness foul play is ruled out. Among *sangomas* this effect is considered absolutely commonplace. At every throw, the probability<sup>56</sup> of a particular combination coming up is as small as 1/16 or 6.25%. Now *sangomas* receive specific training so as to produce desired combinations with a much higher frequency than a mere 6.25%, and it is my impression, although unsupported by statistical evidence, that (like myself) many

of my fellow-*sangomas* have more or less mastered this ability.

Also in practically every electronic *sangoma* divination session I have the equivalent experience: that the computer's random generator produces, as the next throw, precisely the combination I would expect, or would have the best use for, considering the direction of the protocol's unfolding narrative so far. Needless to say that the random generator is supposed to be absolutely independent from my mind: it consists of a built-in seeder function activated by the computer's built-in timer function.<sup>57</sup> A simple programming subroutine, written by me, converts the many possible different outcomes of the random generator into sixteen neatly distinguished equiprobable cohorts, with one specific oracular combination being uniquely assigned to each cohort. The exact moment in time, measured in nanoseconds, that the Enter button is pressed will ultimately determine the seeder number with which the generator is sown, and thus will determine which of the sixteen combinations comes up; but because the user's conscious psychology and the attending retention relaxation times are of the order of magnitude, not of  $10^{-9}$  seconds, but of  $10^{-1}$  seconds, which is incomparably larger, the user has absolutely no conscious control over that precise moment – within any consciously registered lapse of time already millions of different seeders are available for production, i.e. any of the sixteen combinations, but it would be absolutely impossible to develop a conscious technique for choosing the right nanosecond moment. One would speak of psychokinesis<sup>58</sup> in this connection, if, irrespective of the actual exact moment of pressing the Enter button, yet that particular seeder would be produced by the computer as would yield the desired or expected

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<sup>55</sup> Radin & Nelson 1989; cf. Bierman 1993.

<sup>56</sup> The calculation is on the basis of replication, of course, for the next throw uses again the same four tablets.

<sup>57</sup> Microsoft 1988.

<sup>58</sup> Psychokinesis may be defined as: effecting spatial displacement on material bodies without any empirically detectable intermediary.

combination. One would also speak of psychokinesis if, regardless of any regular and completely random production of a particular seeder number, the computer would be able to ignore the programmed algorithm leading from that seeder number to an integer between 1 and 16 (and thus to a particular combination), and would instead bring up the consciously desired combination. When it comes to influencing computational processes in a microcomputer, the ‘material bodies’ involved in such spatial displacement would be electrons; since these might also – ever since the Huygens–Newton controversy – be considered energy waves, the postulated effect amounts to an effect of thought on energy waves: as if the computer were telepathic vis-à-vis the human user’s expectations and desires.

There is an alternative paranormal interpretation for situations like this, where the diviner has the impression of deliberately bringing up (with real tablets or virtually, with a computerised random generator) the exact combination that fits that point in the divination session: in terms of subconscious precognition<sup>59</sup> instead of psychokinesis. Under the precognition hypothesis, the diviner does not control the fall of the real or virtual tablets at all but, through extrasensory means, is informed in advance of what the next throw will be, and this precognition is subsequently, inadvertently, turned into an expectation or a desire. Yet the fact that the desire for a particular combination is

systematically dictated by the unfolding consistent narrative of the session as a whole, would favour a telekinetic explanation rather than one in terms of precognition.

Beside the telepathic model which sees the client’s mind as the source of verifiable correct information coming up in the divination session, one could formulate as an alternative explanation a cosmic model, hypothesising that the diviner is picking up clues, not from individual person’s mind, but from the impersonal natural world as a whole. Once again: every verifiable condition or event leaves traces in the natural world – it is on these very traces that verifiability depends in the first place. For instance, if the client’s father is dead, that means that his body tissue is or has been decomposing, that many or most of the atoms once constituting his body have now found a new context, and that the detectable, localised spatial gradients of this process (for example a faint and fading discolouration of the soil where his body has decomposed) encode it in such a way as to contain unequivocal information on the person’s death, ready to be decoded by any information-processing organism that comes along: not just the diviner (or his mind), but also animal and vegetal organism (rodents, moles, worms, bugs, fungi, bacteria, etc.) attracted by and participating in this process of transformation, C<sup>14</sup> atoms decaying radioactively in dead tissue and no longer replaced by metabolic exchange with the living surrounding world, etc.<sup>60</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>59</sup> On the parapsychology of precognition, cf. Brier 1974; Brier & Schmidt-Raghavan 1982; Eisenbud 1982; Mundle 1964; Rhine *et al.* 1938; Roy 1982; Woodruff & Rhine 1942; Tenhaeff 1980. From an African philosophical perspective, cf. Hebga 1998. Perhaps the most persuasive model formulated to account for such phenomena has been Walker’s (1974, 1977) quantum mechanical theory of precognition. Of course, paranormal precognition has to be clearly distinguished from ordinary prediction, whose mechanisms are studied by mainstream psychology and whose formal conditions form a corner-stone of the philosophy of science: de Finetti 1937; Nisbett & Borgida 1975; Olin 1983; Quine 1953a; Reichenbach 1938; Salmon 1981.

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<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the idea of traces left behind by a deceased person also means that remnants of ‘his disembodied soul’ (which is – Gonda 1943: 84f – the original meaning of the Sanskrit word *karma*, now a household word in the North Atlantic) may continue to cling onto places he has frequented in life, onto his grave and onto the minds of his loved ones and others who are still alive; but while many apparently well-documented cases of haunting by deceased people would suggest such a hypothesis, we do not need it to make our present point. Cf. Tenhaeff 1971; Zorab 1949.

that these clues are available throughout the empirical world is not in doubt; the question is how the diviner is able to perceive and interpret them without physically leaving his room. Under the cosmic model one might hypothesise that the diviner's mind is capable of making contact (by extrasensory means) with these information-loaded traces scattered throughout the material world, and interpret their contents without the intervention of any personal mind except his own. In the latest decades, this idea has received much attention particularly as a result of the writings of Rupert Sheldrake.<sup>61</sup>

From the *sangoma* point of view, meanwhile, the explanation in terms of diviner-client telepathy or the diviner's receptivity to objective information circulating in the universe, would not necessarily be denied but it would be reformulated in ancestral terms. In the *sangoma* discourse, it is the ancestors (the diviner's, the client's, or both) who manifest themselves as the knowing agency in the *sangoma* oracle, and of course these ancestors would know all about the client's life, not only when it comes to readily verifiable facts such as listed in column II of Table 2, but also the hidden details which *sangomas* consider to be far more significant, concerning the client's relation with the ancestral world.

According to the *sangoma*'s ideology it is particularly the use of consecrated tablets, washed in the blood of the sacrificial animals at the height of the *sangoma*'s personal graduation ceremony, that renders the oracle a valid source of ancestral knowledge. As a practicing *sangoma* I am inclined to take this interpretation with a pinch of salt: in 1989, just before her death, I received a set of dummy tablets from our then spiritual leader MmaNdlovu. They were only to be consecrated in sacrificial blood at my graduation under MmaChakayile's direction in 1991. In the intermediate period they were only occasionally washed in the season's

first rain (held to be a powerful medicine since the High God, Mwali, is primarily a bringer of rain), and in commercially packaged<sup>62</sup> ritual fat not derived from my own animal victims. Yet in these intermediate years the tablets performed so well as divinatory apparatus that it was only at my graduation, when they received the full treatment, I realised that until then they must have been mere dummies. Of course, if effective divination depends on the use of a consecrated divinatory apparatus, it is not obvious that a computer would do equally well; but if the apparatus is merely the means to create, through random or not so random throws, a complexity on which the diviner's mind can subsequently work, then the computer could be just as effective, and in my experience it is.

Not all Southern African diviners are spirit mediums, i.e. *sangomas*; many simply engage in divination as an information technology involving the use of a set of tablets or 'bones', without relying on markedly altered states of consciousness. In the previous chapters we encountered one such 'technical' diviner in the person of Mr Smarts Gumede. These diviners usually legitimate their practice by an ancestral dispensation, manifested earlier in life by severe illness, temporary death, dreams or visions, but not by reference to a state of trance in which an ancestor is supposed to descend into the diviner's body and speak through his mouth. The unmistakable parallels between Southern African and West African divination (*Ifa*) are most striking in the case of the Southern African 'technical diviners', for also *Ifa* is a near-mathematical technique not involving altered states of consciousness. The frame of mind is well

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<sup>61</sup> Sheldrake 1981, 1988, 1996; Sheldrake *et al* 2001.

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<sup>62</sup> In South Africa and Botswana there is a local industry producing and distributing nicely packaged traditional medicines, both from the African and from the Afrikaner tradition. These commodities have penetrated the practices of traditional healers to a considerable extent. Cf. Heilbron 1999.

described by Willoughby, the early missionary of the Botswana Kalanga:

'In our eyes the random throw of a diviner's 'bones', or the chance pose of a round-bottomed pot or a few bits of stick, look for all the world like a hazard of dice, a turn of the cards, the tossing of a coin, or the drawing of lots – practices which have long been shorn of such religious significance as they once possessed in Europe.'<sup>63</sup> but if we are to judge the Bantu fairly, still more if we are to help them to scale the steep acclivity of human achievement, we must open our eyes to the fact that they see no element of chance in the soothsayer's professional operations. The diviner claims that he arrives at his findings by definite and intricate rules, and that the tools of his trade are merely mechanical devices, like the planchette of European spiritualists, for discovering the minds of the spirits.'<sup>64</sup>

In our many conversations in the years 1988–1992 Mr Gumede (my principal teacher of the Southern African divination system) repeatedly claimed that the *sangomas'* proper form of divination was exclusively through trance revelation, and that their use of the four-tablet oracle, i.e. a form of cleromancy (divination by lots), amounted to a recent appropriation. These technical diviners tend to rely not only on their material oracular apparatus but also on specific conventionalised praises which they address to their tutelary spirit, their apparatus, and to each specific combination that comes up when the tablets or bones are cast. Older studies of Southern African divination offer extensive lists of such praises.<sup>65</sup> The same situation obtains in West African *Ifa* divination.<sup>66</sup> However, such praises are not a standard part of *sangoma* divination as

practised at the Francistown lodges in the late twentieth century CE.

When reformulating the *sangoma* system towards a format suitable for mediation and recognition on a worldwide basis, the cultural specificity of the notion of 'ancestors' may be expected to pose a major obstacle. Elaborately institutionalised ancestor veneration occurs in sub-Saharan Africa and in East and South-east Asia, but despite the cult of family graves, the reading of masses of the dead, the celebration of All Souls' Day, etc., it cannot be properly said to be a feature of contemporary North Atlantic culture or of the emerging global culture that is based on the latter regional culture. Now, although the *sangomas* take their references to 'the ancestors' literally, it appears meaningful to translate this notion towards a global audience in terms of a metonymical expression for the sum total of conditions that have led to the present moment in the client's life. These conditions do involve the minutiae of the client childhood and adult life, social relations, etc., but also the Big Bang, the subsequent condensation and expansion of the universe, the formation and explosion of novae and supernovae in which the higher chemical elements (beyond hydrogen and helium) were formed without which planets, life, humankind, would have been impossible, subsequently the formation of the earth, the emergence of life, the vagaries of the path of life's evolution across a billion years, the emergence finally of humankind, of the Neolithic Age, the Iron Age, the history of a nation, of a family . . . Viewed thus the oracle claims to address the entire network of causality in essence spanning the entire universe, in the centre of which the client with his predicament finds himself. Such a reformulation of the concept of ancestors does two things that may go some way towards explaining why *sangoma* therapy is effective. It reminds us of the fact that many problems in a person's life stem from the selective acceptance and repression of the past – some aspects of the past are

<sup>63</sup> The Romans believed that the lots were guided by ancestral spirits as well as by the gods. (Willoughby's original note)

<sup>64</sup> Willoughby 1928: 148. Original references to Smith & Dale 1920: I 270, and Callaway 1870: 348.

<sup>65</sup> Coertze 1931; de Jager & Seboni 1964; Dornan 1923; Eiselen 1932; Garbutt 1909; Giesekke 1930; Hunt 1950, 1954, 1962; Junod 1925, 1927; Laydevant 1933; Roberts 1915; Watt & van Warmelo 1930.

<sup>66</sup> Bascom 1969, 1980; Maupoil 1943b.

simply so painful that we cannot face them, and instead warp our lives and personalities around ignoring them or compensating for them. Even if the information content of the *sangoma* oracle comes mainly or exclusively from the client's subconscious and not from the universe at large, then this readdressing and re-articulation of the past is likely to be immensely important and powerful as a redressive therapeutic tool. And if we are allowed to think beyond the client's individuality and may entertain the thought that in fact the whole causal web of the universe is reflected in *sangoma* divination, then we have as a second factor towards the effectiveness of *sangoma* therapy the fact that the client, whatever his personal worries and repressed pain may be, is yet reconfirmed as a part of the universe, of the All – as that part which, by being human, by lending conscious thought and reflexivity to the universe, constitutes its highest known achievement. And also this thought is immensely reassuring and comforting in the face of anxiety and pain. Yet if *sangoma* divination is truly about cosmic causality and cosmic identification, the specifically *ancestral* discourse in which the protocol is cast would have to be considered contingent and epiphenomenal, capable of being replaced by any other discourse, for example, by one claiming that in the oracle it is not the ancestors who speak, but God, Nature, the Universe, Gaia, the diviner consciously playing the role of spiritual advisor, the diviner's subconscious, the client's subconscious, the collective consciousness of the client's family, of his ethnic group, of his nation, of humankind as a whole, or all of these.

Again one could ask: but if – as claimed by the *sangomas* – the ultimate knowledge source of the oracle is the omniscient ancestors or any other similarly omniscient repository of knowledge referred to in an ancestral idiom, why then should the session's content of verifiable knowledge not be 100% correct; why should it contain flaws

precisely where the diviner in his conscious mind was misinformed, or where the diviner carries a personal autobiographical affect (for example in the domain of father-son relations)? If we accept the partial eclipsing of valid information by the diviner's conscious mind as a convincing explanation for error in the case of the telepathic model, the same explanation would be admissible for the cosmic model or the ancestral model. The point is that the correct information available out there is not provided directly, but through the medium of the divination session, which means dependence on the (in principle, random) fall of the tablets, as well as on the diviner's creative freedom to interpret each fall according to a number of complementary dimensions (ancestors, witchcraft, social relation, animals, wealth, health, etc.). The diviner is at liberty to select whatever dimension appears to his conscious mind to be the most appropriate at a particular point in the sequence of throws that make up the session, as the coherent narrative of the protocol is being constructed step by step with each consecutive throw. The diviner with his personal preoccupations and his freedom of choice constitutes a powerful filter that could never produce a 100% correct rendering even if the input of objective empirical facts were 100% correct to begin with.

From the *sangoma* point of view the ancestral model would have the advantage that it posits complete continuity between the verifiable facts about the client's life, and the pronouncements in ancestral and witchcraft terms that offer the client a coherent narrative – cast in ancestral terms – of his predicament, as well as the ritual and conceptual tools to address his predicament actively. Saturated with recognisably true factual details, the client is increasingly persuaded that the ancestral overall narrative in ancestral terms is also correct, and thus the client is brought to reinterpret his predicament as no longer absurd, undeserved, unsolvable, utterly destructive,

hopeless, etc., but as consistent and as amenable to improvement along clearly defined ritual lines.

Under the telepathic model, the autobiographical facts play the same role of enhancing the authority of the oracle's interpretation of the client's situation, and its directions for ritual redress. But since this model situates the source of authority and information not outside the client but in the client's subconscious, the authority thus constructed is far more relative. It may even be relegated to the mere expression of repressed desires and anxieties. However, the client is usually more impressed by the objective autobiographical information than that the thought of this information being tapped telepathically for his own subconscious could completely destroy the oracle's authority as regards spiritual interpretation and therapeutic directions. For after all, the oracle thus offers the means of bringing out and objectifying elements that have gone hidden in the subconscious for a long time and that may have had a pernicious effect on the client's life and happiness.

So we have at least three alternative models to explain why *sangoma* divination could be a source of valid knowledge:

- (1) the telepathic model
- (2) the cosmic model, and
- (3) the ancestral model.

Whichever of these three models we adopt in order to explain the flow of valid information in the *sangoma* divinatory session, an inevitable tenet of the *sangoma* world view is the porous nature of the individual mind and in particular of the diviner's mind. While the dominant paradigm of the natural sciences and of the philosophy of mind in the North Atlantic cannot accommodate the idea of such porosity, it has been a recurrent theme in Western thought, from Plotinus in Late Antiquity to Poortman in the twentieth century CE.<sup>67</sup> In African thought the mind's

porousness is, for instance, a central theme in the world view of the Akan peoples, where the All-Spirit is held to extend to any individual soul, thus constituting a medium by which these souls can interpenetrate.<sup>68</sup>

Either directly (under the telepathic and the cosmic model) or indirectly, under the ancestral model (where the ancestors are supposed to act as intermediaries between knowledge out there and the diviner's mind) the diviner's mind (as author of the session's proceedings) turns out to contain far more than has been consciously stored into it through sensory perception; it is held to be in constant open extrasensory communication with the world (the client's mind, the cosmos, the ancestors) outside the diviner's mind. *Sangomahood* constitutes, among other things, a mental technology to enhance that openness towards the outside world to such an unusually high level that amazing feats of valid knowledge acquisition become possible without sensory perception.<sup>69</sup>

The deliberate unfocusing away from the here and now and from the pressures of sensorialist rationality is a difficult and subtle process, for which *sangoma* training offers the mental technology (but of course many other spiritual traditions all over the world offer the same). The difficulty springs from the built-in contradiction between unfocusing, on the one hand, and, on the other, the *will to unfocus* – a will which tends to trigger the very sensorialist rationality one seeks to escape from. Thus, in the course of the session the diviner is constantly switching from a mode of

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<sup>68</sup> Gyekye 1995; Müller 2002.

<sup>69</sup> A recent breakthrough in prehistoric archaeology has been the idea, pioneered by Lewis-Williams, that Upper Palaeolithic rock art may in essence have aimed at the production of psychedelic devices producing altered states of consciousness – in which, as my argument in this chapter suggests, the extrasensory transfer of knowledge, between generations but also between human carriers of knowledge separated in space and time, is much more likely to occur (Lewis-Williams 1997b; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988, 1989).

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<sup>67</sup> Poortman 1978.

unfocused and uncensored telepathic and cosmic receptivity, to conscious and active rationality; in the latter mode he speaks to the client, casts the tablets, formulates coherent questions and interpretations, and therefore during the total duration of the session the diviner finds himself much more often in the controlled rational mode than in the unfocused mode. In the controlled mode only so little valid knowledge can come through extrasensorily that it can be safely neglected, as it usually is in North Atlantic everyday life. If our dreams, induced trances, near-death experiences, etc. occasionally yield valid extrasensory knowledge it is because the mind is also unfocused in these situations and the censorship of sensorialist rationality is turned off. During a divination session, when the controlled mode constantly alternates with, and intrudes into, the unfocused moments before the latter's conscious and explicit interpretation, the diviner's sensorialist rationality will eclipse all independent extrasensory valid knowledge; what the diviner then brings up in interpretation of a particular throw is merely a combination of

- (a) what he has explicitly been given to know about the client through ordinary sensory means, and
- (b) what he has learned about the explicit meanings and associations of the sixteen combinations.

Under such conditions (which can be expected to prevail among learner diviners, but are impossible to avoid totally even in an experienced diviner's sessions) valid extrasensory knowledge can scarcely come through, and the readings produced have no more than the ordinary, infinitesimally small, statistical chance of corresponding with verifiable facts.

This contradiction is also the reason why nothing is to be expected from a public test of the powers of *sangomahood* before a formal meeting of North Atlantic

researchers, as proposed by Jos van der Klei.<sup>70</sup> In an explicit test situation marked by professional and peer-group challenge and contention, it is nearly impossible to unfocus to such an extent that the subtle extrasensorialist powers which are *in principle* available in *sangomahood*, can actually be mobilised then and there. This is a recurrent theme in parapsychological research: the paranormal capabilities are demonstrable statistically but cannot be summoned instantly and at will, and hence retain a high degree of unpredictability – they are *chaotic* in the technical sense of modern chaos theory. Such unpredictability is by no means a feature peculiar to paranormal phenomena. In that respect they are eminently comparable to nuclear decay: given a macroscopic quantity – say 2 grams – of radioactive material, on the basis of the specific half-life of that material one can predict fairly precisely how much will have decayed after a specific lapse of time; but one can never predict which individual nucleus will decay and when.

In the history of prophetism we find numerous demonstrations of a related phenomenon: prophets' reluctance to give instant demonstrations of their powers, from Jesus declaring

'blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed'<sup>71</sup>

to the Dutch prophet Lou de Palingboer (Lou the Eel-Monger) of the 1950s, who when challenged

'Lou, do perform a miracle for us'

is reputed to have answered:

'It is not that I can't do it, but I just won't'.

Thus we have identified inevitable failures in unfocusing as a major source of error in the *sangoma* oracle. Other sources of error

<sup>70</sup> During the symposium which he and Reini Raatgever organised in 1998, to mark my departure from the Free University in order to take up the chair of intercultural philosophy in Rotterdam.

<sup>71</sup> John 20: 29.

are more incidental and easier to avoid, for example, when the diviner overlooks a certain implication or association of a combination otherwise acknowledged within the *sangoma* system. It may also happen that the diviner is so pleased with a particular narrative line that develops in the course of the interpretation of a number of successive throws, that the next throw is interpreted along the same line, ignoring the possibility that this throw introduced a totally new dimension – but this type of error simply serves as illustration of the controlled mode overtaking the unfocused mode.

In my experience the admixture of correct and wrong verifiable information in a *sangoma* divination session varies considerably from session to session. Repeating a familiar finding in parapsychology,<sup>72</sup> it is not so much deliberate concentration on the part of the diviner that produces the hits (for such concentration activates the filter of sensorialist rationality), nor an exalted sense of self-confident infallibility based on professional accomplishment or supernatural assistance and election, but a relaxed, lightly interested, confident atmosphere bordering on the playful, assisting the unfocusing of the *sangoma*'s mind.

We have seen how unintended misinformation that is stored in the diviner's conscious mind, but also his own autobiographical traumas as consciously acknowledged, may severely obstruct the free flow of correct information into his own conscious mind from wherever outside it. Part of the sessions' variability in veridicity also seems to relate to characteristics on the client's part. For instance, the immensely successful extrasensory transfer of valid objective knowledge in the case recorded in Table 2 is probably related to that client's extensive personal experience with other divinatory and shamanic settings and his eagerness – as detected during the session, and as reluctantly admitted in response to a

specific question to this effect – to personally acquire divinatory and shamanic skills, hence unmitigated (and somewhat blinding) admiration for the diviner's apparently superior powers. Cosmic extrasensory receptivity (or, under the telepathic model, diviner-client extrasensory rapport) may be rather more limited in a case where the client is very sceptical – although I have known such situations to produce excellent and convincing sessions capable of impressing the client and bringing out hidden dilemmas and desires that subsequently could be consciously addressed for the first time. I suspect such receptivity/*rapport* to be at its lowest if a client approaches the oracle with a sham question that does not represent enough of an existential need to mobilise the diviner's mental resources to their maximum extent. In such cases the following combination may come up frequently in the session:

*Mashangula* : “there is no information, the client is erasing the problem”.

Combining in myself the roles of *sangoma* and North Atlantic intellectual, it is not necessary for me to choose between the telepathic, the cosmic, and the ancestral model. All three models are centrally constructed around what reductionist North Atlantic religious anthropology would never have been prepared to admit but what now seems an inescapable conclusion: the capability of the *sangoma* oracular procedures to extrasensorily, and massively, tap sources of valid knowledge that would remain closed by ordinary means of sensory perception. *Sangomahood* thus has implications far beyond the occasional administration of psychotherapeutic counselling in specific settings in Southern Africa and worldwide via the Internet – even though such counselling can be considered a major achievement in itself on the part of *sangomahood* as an African institution. It is immaterial whether the literal ancestral interpretation that is central to Southern

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<sup>72</sup> Tenhaeff n.d.

African *sangomahood* can properly survive the translation of *sangoma* knowledge-generating procedures into a globalised format acceptable in the North Atlantic. The telepathic or cosmic explanations are probably more in line with the thrust of current North Atlantic collective representations, although it is remarkable that those of my clients who are native to the North Atlantic region have generally accepted the ancestral idiom as a long-sought revelation. But whatever explanatory model we prefer, we will have to admit that the knowledge-generating procedures of *sangomahood* reveal significant aspects of the structure of the world, of humankind, and of human knowledge: the fact that the human mind is so porous that it can gather valid knowledge through extrasensory means. This is a factuality which – outside the contentious domain of parapsychology – has not been explicitly acknowledged, in theory, nor mastered, in practice, by North Atlantic science, let alone by the stereotyping scientific collective representations deriving from the latter.

The reader might expect that I would now proceed to unfold a theory about the physical and mental mechanism providing a coherent description and explanation of the amazing forms of extrasensory production of valid knowledge at hand in the *sangoma* oracle. Thanks to the developments in parapsychology in the past two decades there are now a number of well-articulated, sophisticated theories to choose from, notably Sheldrake's theory of morphogenetic fields, which claims

'ubiquitous extrasensory information transfer'<sup>73</sup>

throughout nature; and the theory of non-locality, which is based on Bell's formal analysis of quantum mechanics in the light of the Einstein–Podolsky–Rosen paradox, and allowing for simultaneous effects between bodies regardless of their distance from one

another in space.<sup>74</sup> While Sheldrake may be a rebellious and initially isolated biologist whose 1981 book (*A New Science of Life*) was reviewed<sup>75</sup> in the authoritative journal *Nature* as

'the best candidate for burning there has been for many years',

the quantum mechanical approach to paranormal phenomena boasts, among its contributors and supporters, very prominent physicists. Contrary to what Flew<sup>76</sup> claimed to be the case twenty years ago, there is no question anymore of over-specialised great scientific minds daydreaming about phenomena way outside their specialism, at the same time that ignorant popularisers superficially appropriate – in the manner of the post-structuralist philosophers chastised by Sokal and Bricmont<sup>77</sup> – advanced physics way beyond their comprehension. A wider conceptual context for the recent theoretical advances in parapsychology has been provided meanwhile by the emergence of philosophical discourse on such topics as synchronicity, causality, implicate order, and hylic pluralism.<sup>78</sup>

But whatever the reader's expectations may be, it is outside our present scope to explore these explanatory advances made by others further. They belong to the domains of the philosophy of mind, of epistemology, of the philosophy of nature and of parapsychology, and no longer to that of intercultural philosophy. For the latter domain it is enough to have demonstrated, on empirical grounds that have currency in North Atlantic science and epistemology, the untenability of the hegemonic, subordinating

<sup>74</sup> Bell 1964, 1987; Josephson & Viras 1991; Walker 1974, 1977; Bohm 1980; Bohm & Hiley 1993.

<sup>75</sup> Newth 1981, as quoted anonymously on the blurb of Sheldrake 1981.

<sup>76</sup> Flew 1982: 195n.

<sup>77</sup> Sokal & Bricmont 1997; see my more extensive remarks on their work in chapter 15 of *Intercultural encounters*.

<sup>78</sup> Jung 1972; Poortman 1978; Bohm 1980, 1986; Brier 1974; Brier & Schmidt-Raghavan 1982.

<sup>73</sup> Ertel 1991.

assumptions of a reductionist approach to non-Western systems of belief and ritual practice. My ‘becoming a *sangoma*’ has been intended as an act of political solidarity and unruptured sociability, perhaps also as an act of performatively inserting myself in an exotic high status, but it has most of all been a road to exploring interculturally knowledge regimes outside North Atlantic science and outside North Atlantic scientific collective representations. In the process I have been made aware of the complexity of the intercultural perspective, and have had to acknowledge that the North Atlantic region does by no means have the monopoly of valid knowledge of the world – and therefore has many important lessons to learn yet, deriving from other regional cultural traditions where other forms of valid knowledge have been attained.<sup>79</sup>

### *8. A field of tension: The continuities and contradictions of the intercultural quest for knowledge*

In New York, at the turning point of World War II, and realising full well<sup>80</sup> that its unspeakable disasters had been brought upon humanity by the explosive chemistry between rationality and mythical thought, reacting together and reinforcing each other (instead of excluding each other) in Germany from the eighteenth century CE onwards, Horkheimer and Adorno published their sobering *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.<sup>81</sup> Their long *Exkurs I* is entirely devoted to the development of the Homeric image of Odysseus tied with the ropes of rationality to the mast of his ship, while he and his shipmates are enchanted nearly to the point of self-destruction by the Sirens’ song of

mythical thought.<sup>82</sup> Let us proceed carefully here; for the dialectics of rationality also include Auschwitz and Hiroshima, under a diabolical pact with myth to which rationality, of all human achievements and capabilities, lend the terrible means of realisation. Yet the Homeric image helps to bring out what makes my becoming a *sangoma* such an anathema: the suspicion that I have allowed a scientific mind like mine to be captured, to the point of self-destruction, by regressive mythical thought, and that I am using my status as a well-known anthropologist of religion, and a professor, to corrupt other minds to such mythical thought in departure from rationality.

I have shown that such a view of the situation is wrong. If *sangomahood* is demonstrably a venue to valid knowledge which is not available under the dominant North Atlantic sensorialist model, then it is not irrational, but supremely rational, to adopt and advocate *sangomahood*, and to use this African achievement of mental technology as a corrective to the limitations of North Atlantic science, within an encompassing view of valid knowledge that comprises, along with all other valid knowledge produced by humankind wherever and whenever, both *sangoma* science and North Atlantic science. *Sangomas* are Southern Africa’s local intellectuals *par excellence*. They know themselves to be specialists in knowledge, meaning and truth. The structure of their world view is rational in the sense that it is articulated in terms of well-formed propositions setting forth cause and effect. The same rationality also informs the questions and answers that, punctuated by throws, make up the *sangoma* divination session. If the oracle’s answer apparently does not manifestly address the preceding question, the question is repeated; if the answer is ambiguous (as is often the case), the earlier question is narrowed down so as

<sup>79</sup> On the desirability, for North Atlantic science, to learn from non-Western knowledge traditions, cf. also Harding 1994, 1997; I have taken up her views in: van Binsbergen 2001c, 2002b, 2002c.

<sup>80</sup> Adorno 1951.

<sup>81</sup> Horkheimer & Adorno 1986.

<sup>82</sup> Horkheimer & Adorno 1986: 51-87.

to force a clear outcome. The meanings associated with a particular combination that has come up, reflect rational home truths of the village and the law court. For instance, under the ‘object’ dimension the combination , *Zvibili*, ‘a pair’, has the standard interpretation:

‘This thing cannot move by itself so someone took it away’

– a rational statement in the best classic tradition. A standard interpretation of , *Vuba*, ‘mixture’ is:

‘Let us mix our cattle, but each of us must watch his own’

– a sober reminder of both the sociability and the distrust which together make up Southern African cattle-keeping society. Many oracular admonitions come in the form of rhetorical questions confronting the client with the logical implications of the state of affairs and of his previous actions. Gluckman’s ‘reasonable man’ (the explicit local model of the rationally acting person which this eminent ethnographer of the Zulu and the Lozi (or Barotse) found to inform the court cases he analysed in Barotseland, western Zambia)<sup>83</sup> would feel very much at home in a *sangoma* divination session, which as an institutional complex belongs to the same general cultural area anyway.

And if the *sangoma* oracle yields so much knowledge that is empirically verifiable and which turns out to be correct, it is eminently rational to take seriously also those pronouncements of the oracle that are not open to direct empirical verification (the ancestral interpretations and ritual injunctions). It is not irrational to adopt the premise of the intervention of invisible personal agents, such as ancestors, if that premise provides an obvious explanation of phenomena (*in casu* the production of valid empirical knowledge in the *sangoma* oracle), even if such an explanation is admittedly not

inescapable (no explanation is, as Quine has demonstrated) since the telepathy and the cosmic model offer at least equally attractive explanations.<sup>84</sup> The belief in invisible, eminently powerful agents is not in itself irrational, if articulated rationally; it amounts to a most effective and most economical explanation, even if it might not be the correct explanation. Most of the philosophy of the Western tradition, from classical Antiquity via Late Antiquity (Augustine) to the Middle Ages (Abelard, Aquinas) and right through to Kant was both rational and theistic, that is, cast in terms of the intervention of an invisible, personal, all-powerful being, God. And what is ironic in the present context: cleromantic divination (by the casting of counters such as tablets or dice, as happens in the *sangoma* oracle) was an acknowledged way of ascertaining the will of God or of the gods, not only among many non-Christian peoples,<sup>85</sup> but also in the biblical tradition and in the works of Augustine.<sup>86</sup> Augustine was opposed to astrology,<sup>87</sup> but the great figures of Medieval Christian philosophy, Albertus and Roger Bacon, and even Aquinas – that cornerstone of rational Christian philosophy along Aristotelian lines – repeatedly spoke out in favour of astrology, and wrote extensively on other methods of divination including cleromancy.<sup>88</sup> It is particularly to be appreciated that the same Greeks of the classical period that gave us the lasting

<sup>84</sup> Quine 1953b.

<sup>85</sup> For a very full, and still valuable, comparative account see the many articles on specific peoples, religions and periods *s.v.* ‘divination’ in Hastings *et al.* 1908-1921.

<sup>86</sup> Van der Meer 1947: 69, referring to Augustine’s letter 228, 12, which contains a discussion of Prov. 18: 18.

<sup>87</sup> Augustine 1972: cc. 1-7; van der Meer 1947: 69; Tester 1989: 109f.

<sup>88</sup> Tester 1989: 181, cf. Aquinas, *Commentarii in Aristotelem De caelo et mundo et Alios: De generatione et corruptione* (Aquinas 1980a); Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* III.84 (Aquinas 1980c); Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia, q.115 a.4 (Aquinas 1980d); Aquinas, *De Sortibus* (Aquinas 1980b).

<sup>83</sup> Gluckman 1967, 1969; Yngvesson 1978; van Binsbergen 1977.

foundations of the Western tradition in philosophy, for lack of a centralised state (which was only imposed upon the fragmented city states of Ancient Greece by the, peripherally-Greek, Macedonian Alexander the Great) derived such limited political and cultural unity as they had, largely from the functioning of local, regional and supra-regional oracular shrines, of which Delphi and Dodona were only the two best known.<sup>89</sup> In the best scientific tradition, modern scholars have attempted to explain away the effectiveness of these oracles' pronouncements by claiming that they were based on extensive intelligence networks, complete with spies and mail pigeons, were delivered under circumstances suggestive of sleight-of-hand not to say fraud, and that they were inherently ambiguous and multi-interpretable. Yet there is a distinct possibility that the society which the contemporary North Atlantic has for centuries credited<sup>90</sup> with a paroxysm of, even a monopoly on, rationality, at the same time thrived on the oracular production and circulation of valid divinatory knowledge acquired, by the oracular priests and priestesses, not just by ordinary communication techniques and impression management, but also through genuine extrasensory means.

Meanwhile it is fair to admit that the combination of rationality and theistic beliefs has certainly not gone without challenges, notably from reflections on the problem of evil, from naturalistic explanations of theistic belief as offered by Marx and Engels, Durkheim, and Freud; and the philosophical

<sup>89</sup> Bouché-Leclercq 1879; de Scheffer 1943; Flacelière 1961; Fontenrose 1978, 1980; Maass 1993; Nilsson 1951; Parke 1967, 1972; Parke & Wormell 1956; Rosenberger 2001; Farnell 1895-1909.

<sup>90</sup> Albeit for the wrong, Eurocentric reasons, cf. chapter 15 of *Intercultural encounters* for the *Black Athena* discussion as initiated by Bernal 1987, 1991; and *pace* Dodds 1951. But Bernal did not initiate the debate on Ancient Greek rationality. Already in 1951 Dodds called our attention to what he saw as 'irrational' sides of classical Greek culture.

assessment of atheism, from Plato – himself very much a theist – onwards.<sup>91</sup>

Throughout my work as an anthropologist of religion, Durkheim and Marx have been my theoretical guides. Therefore, while I reject the allegation of being corrupted by mythical thought, I can only acknowledge the tension which exists between my conception of truth as an empirical scientist, and as a *sangoma*.

This tension has informed the long and winding argument throughout Part III of *Intercultural encounters*. But it is a creative, illuminating and liberating tension, as long as it is not obliterated by shifting all our energy, all our allegiance, to only one of the two poles between which the tension exists. The distinctness of the two poles calls forth the tension, but the tension is also the very condition that links them, and renders them part of the same overarching system. The very fact that the tension exists, demonstrates that the two poles are not really irreconcilable and do not really constitute two different worlds, separated by a boundary that cannot be crossed. This is the kind<sup>92</sup> of conceptual material one needs in order to think through both the distinctness, and the interconnectedness, of a plurality of cultural orientations, including, as in the present case, *sangomahood* and North Atlantic sensorialist epistemology. It is the argument I extensively present in chapter 15 of *Intercultural encounters*: 'cultures do not exist'.

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<sup>91</sup> Cf. Durkheim 1912; Flew 2000; Freud 1963, 1972; Marx & Engels 1975-1983, 1957; Nielsen 2000; Peterson 2000; Plantinga 1974, 1993; Plantinga & Wolterstorff 1983; Swinburne 1981; Plato, *Leges*, 885A (Plato 1921). Concerning the last reference: godlessness (*asebeia*) was a most serious offence among the Ancient Greeks, a major factor to earn Socrates, for one, a death sentence.

<sup>92</sup> But not necessarily expressed by the words I use here. Clearly, Derrida's *difference*, Mall's 'localised placelessness', and Guattari's *deterritorialising strategies*, are similar metaphors speaking to the same tension, with comparable effectiveness; Mall 1995; Guattari 1992; Derrida 1967b.

If the undeniable (and, as we have seen in the present chapter, stimulatingly productive) tension between *sangomahood* and North Atlantic epistemology is allowed to be hardened and reified into an absolute contradiction, if the two are considered to be worlds apart, separated by a non-negotiable boundary, then I would have nothing left to say in apology for being both a professor and a *sangoma* – I would succumb, if not to the schizophrenia that would then be the most significant aspect of my personal situation, then at least to the social pressures which the inevitable accusation of schizophrenia would bring upon me.

### 9. Against cultural and epistemological relativism

But let us realise that there is a highly influential school of thought under which this nightmare is already a reality, even a reality taken for granted: cultural relativism. This approach believes in effective boundaries between so-called ‘cultures’. It also believes in the practical autonomy of the process of social life and knowledge construction that take place within these boundaries, in each of the many distinct cultural domains so postulated. Questions such as

‘how can you be a *sangoma* and a university professor at the same time’

imply an absolute contradiction, solid boundaries, separate worlds. While apparently informed by simple common sense, in fact they imply the full package of cultural relativism which, admittedly, has come to be so effectively absorbed into modern North Atlantic common sense as to appear self-evident.<sup>93</sup> In the present chapter (which deals with the intercultural mediation of knowledge and with spiritual technology) autobiography and introspection have played such a prominent role that I could not help raising suspicions of self-indulgence. This

self-referential emphasis has perhaps allowed me to illuminate fundamental points of interculturality, but at the expense of making myself far more vulnerable than philosophers normally do in their texts (with notable exceptions such as Marcus Aurelius and Kierkegaard). Let me end this chapter on a note that is systematic and distancing, and that therefore finally may have some recognisable validity for those many readers whose engagement with interculturality has differed from mine, and may well have been more distant and incidental.

If ‘cultures do not exist’, if we reject cultural relativism, then it is neither possible to be wholeheartedly an epistemological relativist claiming – in the tradition set by Protagoras<sup>94</sup> – that there is a different truth for every time, place, context, and cultural orientation. Just as the problems of intercultural knowledge and understanding are not fundamentally different from the problems of interpersonal knowledge and understanding (because what could have made them different, the existence of a distinct plane of humanity at which ‘cultures do exist’, turns out to be a false assumption), so too there is no *fundamental* difference (not ruling out differences of relatively minor importance), between the implications of rival and apparently mutually incompatible knowledge claims within one scientific discipline (or adjacent disciplines), on the one hand, and the implications of rival and apparently mutually incompatible knowledge claims between different cultural orientations such as the North Atlantic region and the historic Southern African region, on the other. In the philosophy of science, Kuhn’s departure (in terms of, almost, a market conjuncture or fashion of successive and equivalent paradigms – largely informed by Kuhn’s version of the history of science) from the Popperian model of the growth of knowledge through

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<sup>93</sup> Cf. chapter 15 of *Intercultural encounters*.

<sup>94</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus* (Plato 1921, vol. vii); for the refreshing argument that relativism implies its own refutation, cf. Siegel 1993. Also cf. Harris 1993.

methodical falsification at first persuasively appeared, self-fulfillingly, to constitute a revolution in Kuhnian terms.<sup>95</sup> But the new relativism it heralded has now considerably subsided, having produced in the meantime, as a remaining positive effect, a healthily enhanced awareness of the social and political process of scientific knowledge construction.<sup>96</sup> What has emerged is a general acceptance of the insight, already pioneered by Durkheim and especially by Marx,<sup>97</sup> that all knowledge is socially and culturally determined.<sup>98</sup> My point here is that the field within which such determination takes place is not bounded to constitute a single discipline, a single academic elite, a single language domain, a single culture, a single historical period, but that that field ramifies out so as to encompass, ultimately, the entire history of the whole of humankind. Within that maximally extended field, demarcations of relative sub-domains may be made for convenience's sake (and let us not forget: for the sake of institutional interest, as vested in university departments, disciplines, professional organisations, etc.). There is no denying that there are enhanced degrees of interaction, mutual intelligibility, accountability and exercise of power within such sub-domains. Yet the demarcations

between such sub-domains are porous, ephemeral, arbitrary, situational. Therefore, it is not possible for any producer of systematic, intersubjective knowledge (such as science) to retreat comfortably within a secluded (sub-)domain in the privileged and unchallenged enjoyment of his epistemological security. Ultimately all human knowledge construction takes place within one and the same epistemological space.

#### *10. Towards a unitary epistemological stance: The example of the world history of divination systems as early science*

The unitary epistemological space I claim here is reflected in what I see as the unitary history of human science. The process of what finally emerged, in late modern times, as North Atlantic hegemony in the domain of scientific knowledge production, started out, over five thousand years ago and far away from the North Atlantic, as a conscious endeavour of literate specialists, in Ancient Mesopotamia, to administer and improve the two main procedures for the construction of knowledge held to be vitally importance to the king and the state: hepatoscopy and astrology, the two queens<sup>99</sup> of Mesopotamian early science. To the east, the north, and south-east of Mesopotamia there is a continuous pattern of cultural distribution all over Asia, which has allowed the prominent Assyriologist Oppenheim to write:<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Kuhn 1962; Popper 1959; Lakatos & Musgrave 1970; Harding 1994, 1997.

<sup>96</sup> Harding 1986, 1991, 1993; Knorr-Cetina 1983; Latour & Woolgar 1979; Nencel & Pels 1991; Pickering 1984; Pinch 1986.

<sup>97</sup> Durkheim 1912; Marx & Engels 1975-1983, with, on this point, Torrance 1995 as an excellent guide through Marx's oeuvre.

<sup>98</sup> Even though the point is of obvious interest for an argument exploring to what extent the shifting back and forth between a North Atlantic and a Southern African context qualifies or disqualifies knowledge claims, I cannot here explore the implications of the so-called 'strong programme' in the sociology of knowledge, which holds that this social determination amounts not so much to undesirable and discardable accretions upon a kernel of true knowledge unaffected by such determination, but that true knowledge itself is socially determined. Cf. Barnes 1974, 1982; Bloor 1991; Brown 1984, 1989.

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<sup>99</sup> Cf. Gadd 1966: 30:

'the two queens of Babylonian science, the extispicium and astrology, with oil-divination (in its formal aspect) a sister younger in importance if not in age'.

<sup>100</sup> Oppenheim 1966: 37. My own comparative historical research into the antecedents of African divination systems since 1990 (van Binsbergen forthcoming (d)), across at least three continents and five millennia, clearly has been in part fulfilment of the collective task outlined by Oppenheim. In my impression the evidence for cleromantic divination in

'Divination is applied in Mesopotamia on two distinct levels – the popular or folklore level and that of elaborate scholarly amplification and specialization. Both constitute a trans-Asiatic culture trait. Evidence for this is available from the Mesopotamian region across Asia to China, with Japan in the East and Etruria in the West as outposts. In Egypt, divination remains conspicuously absent up to the last dynasties, when a good deal of "Asianization" took place. There is a wide range in the media and the techniques of divination, conditioned by time and region. These variations only underline the deep-seated and lasting need for this type of communion with the supernatural, whatever specific methods of observation and interpretation are applied. (...) Wherever in Asia either the observations or the predictions related to divination have been preserved in writing, or where – this optimum happened only in Mesopotamia – both aspects of this science are available to us, we are given the opportunity to look deep into such a civilization. From the oracle bones of Anyang in northern China and the earliest liver models found in Mari to the elaborate horoscope of yesterday's India, we have an overwhelming abundance of information well able to take us on a grand tour through space and time, exploring much of the intellectual history of Asia. Like currents which move across the entire immense continent, central Asiatic divination practices reach the Euphrates (extispicy) and become there the object of scholarly endeavors from the early second millennium B.C. onward, and Mesopotamian astrology and other divination methods penetrate eastward through India, Tibet, and into China during the first half of the first millennium A.D. To trace these lines of contact will be the task of several generations of scholars

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Egypt in the second and third millennium BCE is somewhat more positive than Oppenheim claims; but he is certainly representing a view commonly held among Egyptologists. By the same token, Oppenheim's contention that extispicy – a divinatory art raised to great perfection in Ancient Mesopotamia – must originate in Central Asia may be too sweeping; considering the ethnographic record it might as well originate in Africa where it has also been attested (cf. Rose 1911: 779 for the Nandi and the Masai in East Africa; Abbink 1993 for Ethiopia; van Binsbergen 1984b, 1988b, and *Intercultural encounters*, chapter 13.1, on the West African Manjak), or have such great antiquity (Upper Palaeolithic) that it can be subsumed under a general Old-World substratum encompassing both continents, as well as Europe.

from many disciplines.'

Pan-Babylonianism reigned and died a century ago,<sup>101</sup> and we no longer believe that, since it is in Mesopotamia<sup>102</sup> that we have first documentary attestations for a particular widely distributed trait, that means that Mesopotamia is where the trait originated. Rather we should view the history of science in the Old World as a complex evolving system of interaction, in which a widespread Neolithic, or more likely Palaeolithic, cultural substratum, with virtually ubiquitous distribution across the Old World, came to be locally formalised with the emergence of literacy, of specialist intellectual production, of organised religion, and of the state, in Mesopotamia and (in an initially linked but rapidly divergent way) in Egypt. Subsequently the local literate variant (of that cultural system whose illiterate variants have displayed a very much wider distribution than these two regions alone) acquired such incomparably greater capability of transmission and boundary crossing, that it spread over much of the original, large non-literate distribution area, and imposed its own literate form (soon in subsequently no-longer-literate derivates, as localising transformations); after which the whole process repeated itself elsewhere within, at the fringes of, and eventually even beyond the original distribution area of the substratum.<sup>103</sup>

Of this global process, North Atlantic science is certainly not the only offshoot to survive into the twentieth century CE. And when, in the late first millennium and the first half of the second millennium CE, this process spread to western Europe through monks and clerics guarding and rediscovering the heritage of Graeco-Roman Antiquity, to which crusaders and, particularly, Jewish, Arab and Byzantine

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<sup>101</sup> Winckler 1903, 1907; Schmidt 1908. Already L.W. King (1915) put paid to this movement.

<sup>102</sup> Or in Ancient Egypt, for that matter.

<sup>103</sup> Van Binsbergen 1996c, 1996e, forthcoming (a), forthcoming (d).

translators and mediators added what the Near East had retained, developed and received from the rest of Asia (often via the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean trade)<sup>104</sup> and from Africa (through the Indian Ocean trade and the trans-Saharan trade)<sup>105</sup> – then this scholarly science (of which magic and the occult have constituted an amazingly large part throughout the millennia, only to decline in the West in the last few centuries),<sup>106</sup> was implanted upon a substratum of much older local knowledge. The latter constituted, in many respects, the western fringe of the Old World substratum that had, four millennia earlier, informed the first attested rise of science in Mesopotamia in the first place – note the similarities, even continuities, in language, world view, myths, socio-political organisation, religion, ritual, and divinatory practices between the ancient world of north-western Europe, the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean, and the Ancient Near East. It is their basis in literacy that has helped forms of specialist knowledge to retain something of their original outlines, and to remain detectable for our scholarship even after processes of secondary diffusion and transformative localisation had been going on for centuries.

Since the discovery of the Indo-European language family, the continuities in language need no further adscription, even though the neat Romantic idea of a branching tree is now increasingly supplanted, among linguists, for that of complex fields of spatial interaction within syntactic and phonological constraints. The continuities in world view (to which I shall devote the entire, excessive long chapter 8 of this book) are demonstrated most cogently in works like Stricker's *The birth of Horus*.<sup>107</sup> His point of departure is an

obscure Ancient Egyptian textual and iconographic composition on human conception and birth. He demonstrates that the insights to read such a document may be confidently gleaned from Ancient Greek, Roman, Hebrew, Persian, Teutonic and Vedic literatures that happen to converge amazingly on these points. Continuities in the field of myths can be adequately demonstrated from any major comparative survey, of which there is a great number.<sup>108</sup> On socio-political and religious organisation, especially the work of and around Dumézil deserves to be mentioned here.<sup>109</sup> Continuities in divination throughout the Old World are unmistakable (above we saw a long quotation from Oppenheimer on this point) and have been noted early on.<sup>110</sup>

Given the rediffusion of sacred kingship from pharaonic Egypt over Africa (as one example of the feedback process hinted at above),<sup>111</sup> and the diffusion of Islam and Christianity over the African continent (a process that also may have had some elements of the same feedback process, given the probability that these world religions count African elements among their antecedents), second millennium CE African knowledge systems may also be seen as distant offshoots, however isolated and disguised, of the same worldwide history of systematic specialist knowledge that produced modern science in the North Atlantic.

The latter point has an excellent illustration in the history of astrology, which can be traced over five millennia and ramifies over the entire Old World.<sup>112</sup> But

<sup>108</sup> Conveniently listed in Long 1993. In chapter I shall discuss Fontenrose (1980) as a particularly convincing example of such mythological studies.

<sup>109</sup> Dumézil 1939, 1958, 1959, 1969, 1970, 1986.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Gaskell 1911, against the background of the extensive material on divination in Hastings 1908-1921.

<sup>111</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (a).

<sup>112</sup> Pingree 1978; the commentary in this book amounts to an excellent comprehensive overview of Hellenic, Hellenistic, Arabian, Persian, and Indian

<sup>104</sup> Needham *c.s.* 1961.

<sup>105</sup> Neville *et al.* 1975; Davidson 1959; Duyvendak 1949; Toussaint 1966; Schoff 1912; Tibbets 1971; Sauvaget 1948.

<sup>106</sup> Thorndike 1923-58; Thomas 1978; Bergier 1988; Levack 1992.

<sup>107</sup> Stricker 1963-1989.

the same point may also be made by reference to the, considerably less studied, divination systems of the African continent,<sup>113</sup> which both in West Africa (where they occur under the names of Ifa, ‘Sixteen Cowries’) and in Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean region, are unmistakable transformations of the Arabian divinatory magic called *‘ilm al-raml* (‘sand science’) or *khatt al-raml* (‘sand writing’)<sup>114</sup> emerging around 1000 CE in <sup>c</sup>Abāssid Iraq under the combined influence of Islamic (*Ikhwan al-Safa'a*), Chinese (*I Ching*), Hellenistic (astrological), Ancient Egyptian, and Saharan divinatory procedures. The esoterists’ recurrent dream<sup>115</sup> of all of the Old World’s occult sciences being shoots of the same tree and being supported by a loose international network of itinerant sages sharing a convergent knowledge and recognising each other by secret signs, may not be totally devoid of historical reality.

Meanwhile my argument in the present chapter suggests that, to the attestable mechanisms of transregional transfer of knowledge under pre-modern technologies of communication (such as itinerant trade, the

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astrology, and cites the important literature in these fields. European astrology since Renaissance times is mainly Ptolemaic (Hellenistic/Late Antiquity) but has absorbed a selection of the oriental traditions. For Ancient Egyptian astrology (according to most authorities a late development under Persian influence), cf. Cumont 1937; Gundel 1936a, 1936b; Kroll 1894a, 1894b; Neugebauer 1943; Parker 1978.

<sup>113</sup> Bascom 1969, 1980; Bewaji 1992; Hébert 1961; Kassibo 1992; Maupoil 1943a, 1943b; Traoré 1979; Trautmann 1939-1940; van Binsbergen 1996c.

<sup>114</sup> al-Zanati 1908-09; Carra de Vaux 1920; Jaulin 1991; Savage-Smith & Smith 1980; Skinner 1980; van Binsbergen 1996e.

<sup>115</sup> For the esoterist claims, cf. Blavatsky 1938; Shah 1971. The same theme of interregional networks of knowledge from a mainstream scholarly perspective in: Burkert 1983a; Needham c.s. 1961. The esoterist variant of this theme was first brought to my attention in May 1991 by my friend and colleague Louis Brenner, specialist in African Islamic occult sciences of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, when asking my advice on the perplexing Bowen n.d. (1), cf. Bowen n.d. (2).

active spread of world religions, the activities of itinerant healers and entertainers), an entire new dimension might be added: transregional and transtemporal transfer of specialist knowledge by extrasensory means. I shall not push this point. Dreaming of rewriting the history of science along such lines could only produce nightmares, but the idea offers an interesting explanation (remarkably economical in terms of Occam’s razor) for the many cases where inventions and ideas, cryptically said to be ‘in the air’, suddenly materialised simultaneously at different places; or for the wide and comparatively untransformed spread of systems of knowledge whose detailed complexity would seem to be incompatible with such spread, such as in the case of alphabetic writing, astrology, lunar mansions, and geomancy. Sheldrake’s theory of morphogenetic fields suggests that ideas which are massively popular in one part of the world would, *ipse facto*, find morphogenetic support in parts of the world where they have not yet been introduced. Along similar lines, but in time not space, the transtemporal transfer of extrasensory specialist knowledge is already pioneered, inevitably under scorching sarcasm from the Sceptics’ side, by the psychometric reading of archaeological exhibits.<sup>116</sup> In psychometry, a material object (for example artefact, letter, photograph, etc.) is ‘read’ so as to produce, by extrasensory means, knowledge about past circumstances associated with that object. Tenhaeff<sup>117</sup> relates an psychometric reading of an artefact belonging to a South African Iron Age site; involving stray Persians in that part of the world, the reading was at first rejected as utterly fantastic, but its plausibility (no more, of course – but that is typical of archaeology) was later independently corroborated by the South African archaeologist Van Riet Howe: the

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<sup>116</sup> Emerson 1979; Goodman 1977; Jones 1979; Ossowiecki 1933; Wolkowski 1977.

<sup>117</sup> Tenhaeff n.d.

appearance of Persians in the Southern African context is a recurrent theme of history and ethnography, and considering the prominence of Persian (Shirazi) settlement on the East African coast must be considered probability than fantasy.<sup>118</sup>

The chain of communication linking both sub-Saharan Africa and Europe with a common inspiration in the Middle East has long been broken, or has been very indirect at best for many centuries. Localising transformation has produced very distinct specialist knowledge systems in contemporary North Atlantic science and in Southern African *sangomahood*. Yet the two do not exist in completely different worlds. In fact they have shared most of their five millennia of traceable history – to the extent that *geomancy*, the West European derivative of *'ilm al-raml*, was<sup>119</sup> the subject of innumerable early translations and treatises in Jewish and Christian literature of the first centuries of second millennium CE Europe, was moreover a standard form of magic at Renaissance courts,<sup>120</sup> as well as the standard form of peasant self-help divination in Germany in the nineteenth century,<sup>121</sup> while nowadays it is again a thriving divinatory industry in the New Age context,<sup>122</sup> although far surpassed in popularity by astrology.

If thus the history of magic-into-science encompasses both North Atlantic science and the Southern African *sangoma* oracle, and if I can effectively insert myself at various points into the attending spatial distribution and toggle between these historically determined positions, this is because the

boundaries that make these positions appear as fundamentally different and irreconcilable, are merely accidental: the product of epistemological and geopolitical strategies and historical events (especially the emergence of North Atlantic military, political and economic global hegemony) of the last few centuries. If we allow ourselves to think these boundaries otherwise, notably as the indications of gradients of difference within an extended and shared field, the initially irresolvable and brutal contradiction dissolves into an illuminating and productive tension.

For such an extended, internally tensioned field of knowledge production encompassing, in principle, the whole of humanity and the entire human history, not a plurality of different epistemologies is called for, but a single one, provided it is interculturally sensitive.

Although anti-relativism as an epistemological position (mainly directed against Kuhn and his aftermath) is fairly well articulated in the literature, anti-relativism in the field of cultural and intercultural studies has become a rather unpopular option, the most vocal exponents being Gellner's school.<sup>123</sup> This unpopularity is easy to understand. The anti-relativist proclaims to measure all cultural orientations, even the weakest in terms of power and numbers, even the one whose bearers have undergone the greatest historical wrongs, by a common standard that – unless we are extremely careful and self-critical – may well risk to be inherently hegemonic and subjugating, and may certainly be accused of being just that. By contrast, the relativist position ('let a thousand flowers bloom') appears as the champion of equity, justice, understanding and respect, the true exponent of the contemporary multi-cultural global society under the politics of recognition. The snag is that the relativist position can only realise its lofty goal at the expense of literally, deliberately and with the best of intentions,

<sup>118</sup> Neville *et al.* 1975; van Warmelo 1966; von Sicard 1952, 1962.

<sup>119</sup> Carmody 1956; d'Alverney 1982; Steinschneider 1904, 1905.

<sup>120</sup> Agrippa 1967; Anonymous 1704; de Cattan 1608; Piobb 1947; Turner *c.s.* 1989: 103f.

<sup>121</sup> Anonymous 1920; Anonymous n.d.; Bolte 1925; Helm 1983: 72–78; Hofmann 1919; Storm 1981.

<sup>122</sup> Hamaker-Zondag 1981; Pennick 1979, 1992a; Schwei & Pestka 1990; and many Internet sites to be identified s.v. 'geomancy, geomantic' by any of the common search machines.

<sup>123</sup> Gellner 1990; Hall & Jarvie 1996.

excluding all other cultural orientations from the principles that apply to the one cultural orientation of its exponents – it is a form of conceptual and epistemological apartheid. It sends non-European knowledge traditions back to the ghetto, instead of fondly welcoming them, and allowing ourselves to be welcomed by them, as long lost distant relatives who carry their own inalienable and original credentials as to being members of our global family of knowledge producers. It is the political pathos that makes the debate on relativism and anti-relativism so vicious.<sup>124</sup>

This is not to deny the existence of numerous attempts, in the field of intercultural philosophy and the philosophy of religion, particularly with regard to apparently (from the North Atlantic perspective) irrational belief systems that seek to solve the contradiction on which the present chapter hinges, in terms of a careful relativism.<sup>125</sup> Although I do not endorse these attempts for the reasons indicated, I certainly do not wish to cast doubt on their authors' intellectual and political integrity. My own appeal to a unitary concept of truth that, while in creative tension with local specificities, yet pervades both time and space, is admittedly problematic, especially

<sup>124</sup> Geertz 1984 and n.d.; Gellner n.d. Between my distinguished predecessor Heinz Kimmerle, and myself, the same bone of contention can be occasionally detected.

<sup>125</sup> For examples, and their criticism, cf. Horton 1993; Sogolo 1998; Winch 1964; Sperber 1982 (a most exciting and recommended analysis which convincingly succeeds in finding rationality in such apparently absurd statements like ‘this morning I encountered a dragon’). Above, I suggested that, where the assessment of a belief’s irrationality is concerned, I prefer to put myself in an *emic* position (see the discussion of this term in chapter 15 and elsewhere in *Intercultural encounters*). The only irrational belief I acknowledge as such is one that emphatically proclaims at the same time two premises that are manifestly and blatantly contradictory. Given religions’ expertise at covering up contradictions, examples of such irrational beliefs may not be so easy to find as the frequency of appeals to their occurrence in philosophical literature would suggest.

in the face of the philosophy of difference with its rejection of any claim of a timeless, placeless truth, of a privileged position.

### *11. Situating sangomahood in the field of tension between universalist and particularist conceptions of truth*

Here it becomes gradually manifest that the contradiction between relativism and anti-relativism also adheres to my own evolving attitude towards *sangomahood*. Not wanting to dissociate myself from *sangoma* beliefs simply because that would constitute a breach in the networks of sociability which I previously entertained as an anthropological fieldworker and as a budding *sangoma*, tends towards the position of relativism; as if I were saying:

‘regardless of whether this is true for me (I think it is not), I acknowledge the fact that it is true for you, and if I affirm you in your truth that means that I wish to acknowledge your dignity and do not grudge you your own rightful niche within the ecosystem (the jungle, no doubt) of relativism.’

By contrast however, affirming *sangoma* ideas and continuing to practice *sangoma* activities on the grounds that they constitute valid knowledge and that they do work, tends not towards relativism but towards universalism. For now I am saying:

‘this does work, it is valid, it is true, not only in Southern Africa in some remote village or poor suburb where I may hide from my colleagues and blood relatives, but also in the North Atlantic region, and globally, on the Internet, where I am prepared to articulate it publicly.’

And:

‘It is not possible that this can only work, be valid, be true, in Southern Africa, because there is no real boundary between here and there; because “cultures do not exist”’.

The universalist side sounds much more attractive and politically correct, but once again we must be careful not to destroy the creative tension between these two positions, by siding exclusively with one of the poles of the opposition. For only if this tension is

kept up can I stress the validity of one, unitary, all-pervading concept of truth (by virtue of which the *sangoma* oracle produces valid knowledge), while at the same time serving two different masters who fight over my time and my allegiance – *sangomahood* and North Atlantic science.

What I deliberately do in my practice as a *sangoma*, in interaction with my clients, is to mediate, not a universal truth (*not* universal science as some sort of general, liberating heritage of humanity as a whole?), but a very local and essentially non-verifiable truth, cast in terms of ancestors, witchcraft, sacrifices and shrines. At the same time I lend authority to that local truth by producing, in the same session as that in which that truth is expounded, verifiable truths from the client's life-truths that are open to verification under practically any epistemological regime.

It now begins to transpire that *sangomahood* is not exclusively, not even in the first place, about the mediation of a particular cultural system originating in Southern Africa. *It is about the hope of escape from the overdeterminacy implied in sensorialist rationality, from the 'cold equations',<sup>126</sup> from the disenchanted robotic world without spirituality, without miracles, and especially without a deep sense of freedom and therefore of self-chosen engagement – the faith (not necessarily in God or in the ancestors) that can and does remove mountains.<sup>127</sup>* Believe in miracles, and you get them; believe not in them, and they will pass you by. Or as I expressed it in a different context,

'the *sangoma* oracle is a way of speaking about the modern world by ignoring it.'<sup>128</sup>

For many of my divinatory clients, whether residents of the North Atlantic region or of Southern Africa, the ancestral idiom constitutes a *new* point of view; even African clients often need to be re-converted

to it – they tend to be so globalised<sup>129</sup> that the concept of ancestors usually merely stirs vague anxieties and guilt feelings in them, instead of a happy recognition of a lost cultural home once again coming within reach. I expose my clients to intercultural information that makes them begin to consider the ancestors as a possible, thinkable truth in their life, so that they finally find a lever to bring their life back onto its proper track. I thus articulate, unblushingly (although European-born, White, and a university professor specialised in the deconstruction of African religion), a Southern African tradition, while underpinning that tradition, almost deceptively, with universal knowledge procedures about empirical reality.

## *12. Situating sensorialist rationality and defining its boundary conditions*

In conclusion we must consider once more, if only briefly, the place of sensorialist rationality in the world-picture that is (albeit fragmentarily) emerging from this chapter. The contradictions are obvious. Trying to both have his cake and eat it, a writer (me) obviously proud of his accomplishments and skills as an empirical scientist lends the methods and the discourse of empirical science, further enhanced by the rational tradition of Western philosophical reflection on knowledge and truth, in order to state the case for his oracle producing valid knowledge through extrasensory means, be they telepathic or otherwise. In other words, an appeal to sensorialist rationality is used to think beyond the limitations of sensorialist rationality. Partly the contradictions are inspired by the choice of audience: since this book is written for philosophers and social scientists, its argument will be best understood and appreciated by them if more or less successfully emulating a discourse

<sup>126</sup> Cf. Godwin 1971.

<sup>127</sup> Matt. 17: 20, 21: 21; Mark 11: 23; I Cor. 13: 2.

<sup>128</sup> Van Binsbergen 1999c.

<sup>129</sup> For the effect of globalisation on ancestral beliefs in Southern Africa, see chapter 14 of *Intercultural encounters*.

they are familiar with. I could have said the same thing while remaining entirely within the established *sangoma* idiom, but that would have been pointless – for the point is mediating that idiom to a new context, where it can articulate new insights, and cast new light on old insights. My position aspires to being more than performative and persuasive – it struggles to bring out a truth even if that truth's essence, by virtue of its interculturality, is that it can hardly be articulated let alone substantiated within any one cultural orientation, including that of philosophy in the Western tradition.

I find it illuminating to view the matter as one of a restricted domain, defined by certain boundary conditions, but enclosed by a much wider domain where those specific limiting boundary conditions do not apply.

An obvious and often used example is Euclidean planimetry,<sup>130</sup> which has as its boundary conditions two-dimensionality ( $z \leq 2$ ), where the sum of the angles of a triangle is  $180^\circ$ . This restricted domain is enclosed by a wider but still Euclidean domain, where  $z \leq 3$ , so that in spherical triangles the sum of the angles exceeds  $180^\circ$ . Even this wider domain is merely a restricted domain, enclosed by a wider domain opened up by modern mathematics, where  $z$  may approach infinity, need not be an integer, may be negative, etc.

Another obvious example is Newtonian physics viewed as a restricted domain demarcated by specific boundary conditions (including three-dimensional Euclidean space, and the choice of a meso level order of magnitude commensurate with the human body and its capabilities of perception: the range between  $10^{-4}$  and  $10^{+4}$  metres) as merely a small section of the much larger domain opened up by Einstein's theory of relativity.

The point is that formally irreproachable arguments within such a restricted domain lead to results which are at the same time true, and yet not exhaustive. In the same way, the world-picture produced along the

lines of sensorialist rationality should be considered a restricted domain. Its arguments are both true and non-exhaustive. Sensorialist rationality is tailored to the measure of the Newtonian world with its specific boundary conditions, and therefore has constituted, ever since the remotest Lower Palaeolithic, man's most powerful, and increasingly sharpened, tool for confronting and mastering the Newtonian world.

Sensorialist rationality is understandably privileged, not only for historical reasons but also for another reason. Implied in sensorialist rationality (and greatly aided by its main tools: writing and graphic representation in images) is the subject–object distinction that has given rise to the emergence of scientific thought in the Ancient Near East, to philosophy, to the modern world, North Atlantic science and technology, and North Atlantic hegemony. Formidable achievements, no doubt, but we must make two qualifications.

In the first place let us acknowledge that this line in the history of human knowledge production has implied an obsession with external control over nature, with violence, therefore; and we have seen, ever since the inception of the Bronze Age, and *a fortiori* since the inception of the Iron Age, and especially in the course of the twentieth century CE, how Lower Palaeolithic survival strategies, but with modern conventional and nuclear weaponry at their disposal instead of the crudest stone tools, lead to explosive violence<sup>131</sup> and ultimately very near to the destruction of both humanity and the earth as a whole.

Paradoxically, one can learn (for example as a *sangoma*) to participate more fully in the wider domain of the world's potential beyond the limitations of rational sensorialism, and thus have a larger share of extrasensory perception, psychokinesis, etc., than most people in most situations enjoy, but one cannot exercise *deliberate control* in

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<sup>130</sup> Cf. Balazs 1961.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. Gimbutas 1982, 1991.

this wider domain. All one can do is open windows, make oneself available, and wait. If one expertly performs one hundred *sangoma* divination sessions, and each session has thirty throws on the average, then one may expect hundreds of items of extrasensorily acquired knowledge to seep through in that body of material, but one can never pinpoint in advance precisely where this will be the case, let alone will a particular throw to yield extrasensory knowledge. The will is the typical faculty of rational sensorialism, given the latter's obsession with control over nature, but it is pointless in the wider domain of which rational sensorialism opens up only a small segment.

In the second place the tradition of thought and research that rationalist sensorialism engendered, led us to become aware of the limitations of that philosophical position, and made us wonder as to the boundary conditions that, if chosen differently, would allow us entry into the wider domain of which sensorialist rationality is most probably only a very minor option. The questions may have come from inside the Western tradition, but such answers as we are beginning to formulate come from outside that tradition. Intercultural and comparative philosophy, as well as cultural anthropology and the various linguistic and cultural regional fields of studies (African studies, Asian studies, etc.), provide a window on traditions of thought that, even if they may originally have shared the same Ancient Near Eastern impulse, or may have picked up remote echoes of it in later centuries, still have not been dominated by sensorialist rationality to the same extent as the West has been. Here not only models of thought, but also bodies of articulated experience, may be encountered that remind us of alternatives to sensorialist rationality. *Sangomahood* is certainly such a body, and there is no doubt that the traditions of Africa, Asia, the Americas, Oceania, and Ancient Europe contain many such bodies. They do

not only present alternative models about the non-human world, but also about the way in which the human condition is situated within the wider world: possibly articulated models of thought that contain alternatives for the subject-object distinction, and especially procedures of action by which the human being situates herself in the world – in order to sustain a livelihood, but also to contemplate, to admire, to know, to love. To the extent to which these procedures have to be successful for materially productive tasks in the Newtonian world, they spring from the same Palaeolithic survival strategies as have inspired North Atlantic sensorialist rationality. But when it comes to procedures of contemplation, admiration, knowing, to which Newtonian materiality may be less central, we can expect these worldwide traditions to contain modes of managing the self that are so fundamentally different from the North Atlantic subject-object construction, that the boundary conditions imprisoning us into the restrictive option of rationalist sensorialism may be effectively circumvented.

Seen in this light, it is not exoticism and escapism that brings us to the study of the paranormal, but a desire to know the full range of reality, so that we may overcome the terrible and violent shortcomings of the main strategy (rationalist sensorialism) with which we have so far approached the world and ourselves. If the study and practice of *sangomahood* can contribute to that goal, it is time well spent.

Thus my struggle to 'become a *sangoma*' (chapter 5), to articulate subsequently that identity by means of a therapeutic practice situated – both spatially and conceptually – within the North Atlantic region (chapter 6), and to translate the Southern African *sangoma* complex to a globalised format in the process while affirming it as a source of valid knowledge in its own right under a worldwide non-relativist epistemology (chapter 7), contains, in a nutshell, many of

the major dilemmas of intercultural philosophy, and of the human condition in the present age.

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