

***Part I. Cultural anthropology as a form
of intercultural knowledge
production – its potential and
shortcomings***

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Chapter 1

Virtuality as a key concept in the study of globalisation

Towards an anthropology of present-day Africa's symbolic transformation

After my oral-historical and ethnographic field-work on popular Islam in the highlands of North-Western Tunisia (1968, 1970), I joined the Department of Sociology of the University of Zambia, South Central Africa. Although teaching, administration, and our family life under (then, anyway, still) unfamiliar tropical conditions absorbed most of my time, living in Lusaka, the capital of a newly independent country in sub-Saharan Africa offered immense opportunities for field-work. Moreover, local research was greatly encouraged by the University of Zambia and – in those days before the collapse of copper revenues – even subsidised, so that expatriate lecturers of social science could be better equipped for their already arduous task of teaching an unfamiliar discipline to Zambian students straight from boarding school – or, as most of my students then, not even staying at campus but dispersed all over the country and, in these pre-Internet times, only reachable through correspondence, mimeographed syllabuses, and summer schools. Under those constraints, my first field-research in sub-Saharan Africa was to be u r b a n research, on such topics as: Lusaka churches as voluntary associations; churches as factors of social control in the management of urbanites' marital life; religious affiliation as a factor in educational success; and gradually (under the influence of the urban immigrant Mr Dennis Shiyowe from the Nkoya people in Western Zambia, who was to become my research assistant, and ended up as my elder brother) what was to remain my main topic of urban research: the staging of female puberty rites, healing-cult sessions, and funerals, by Lusaka urban immigrants. It this connection I learned the basics of the Nkoya language and of the urban migrants' Nkoya culture, but it was only after extending my research to the remote rural areas of Kaoma District, and into the recent and remote past, that

my career's main research project began to take shape. Urban anthropology had received ample attention in the course of the excellent education I had received at Amsterdam University, yet my scientific perspective and field experience (like that of most anthropologists at the time) were predominantly rural. My early Lusaka research forced me to come to terms⁷⁷ with the bewildering complexities and contradictions of modern African life in an urban setting, and to join my research hosts in their struggle to make sense of a life world that had left them utterly poor, powerless, deprived from most material, sexual, social, cultural and spiritual resources that could be taken for granted in their original village environment, and forced them to live among linguistic and cultural strangers. How was meaning at least partially, and fragmentarily, being reproduced, or rather restored, in their lives? What was the role of urban-rural ties in that process? What was the role of the state, the modern economy, formal education, and formal organisations such as churches, schools, mines, companies? When by the late 1980s African Studies were launched on the path of globalisation studies, these questions obtained a new relevance and new interpretative paradigms, but they were essentially familiar questions, whose answer required not just a grounding in globalisation theory and post-modern thought, but also a solid empirical familiarity with the realities of African life today.⁷⁸ As a stepping-stone towards the intercultural-philosophical arguments that make up the bulk of the present volume, I offer as the first Chapter of this book a long argument on virtuality as a key concept for the understanding of globalisation in the African context. Since towns have functioned as the main interfaces between historic African life and the outside forces of globalisation, our emphasis in most of this Chapter will be on urban conditions. In order to prepare the reader for this specific empirical focus, I introduce, as the first Section of this Chapter, another stepping-stone: an overview (now dated in some respects, still relevant in others) of the state of the art in African urban studies by the time globalisation studies were around the corner.

'When children play at trains their game is connected with their knowledge of trains. It would nevertheless be possible for the children of a tribe unacquainted with trains to learn this game from others, and to play it without knowing that it was copied from anything. One might say that the game did not make the same sense to them as to us.' (Wittgenstein 1967a / 1953: 97e, 282; needless to point out that this quotation addresses virtuality, and does not express the racist view of (urban) Africans as children.)

1.0. African towns: Some sociological aspects

African urban studies emerged shortly before World War II (e.g. Hellman 1935; Wilson 1942), as social scientists began to realise that the almost exclusive emphasis, in African social research at the time, on rural life was both intellectually and politically one-sided. Sizeable towns had for centuries been a feature both of the continent's coastal societies and of various parts of the interior;

⁷⁷ However, from the Africanist perspective, my colleague Buijtenhuijs and I also sought to made a contribution to the study of West European urban society; van Binsbergen & Buijtenhuijs 1978.

⁷⁸ The passion for urban African research as, especially, a quest for meaning remained with me and, apart from early Lusaka-related papers (van Binsbergen 1974, 1982), yielded such later studies as van Binsbergen 1990 (on therapeutic meaning in Francistown, Botswana), 1993d (symbolism in the context of a Botswana town a), 1995e (on globalisation and decivilisation in urban Botswana), 1997f and 2000g (how a young female migrant makes sense of her urban space in Botswana), and 2000f (on church and social conflict in a Lusaka family conflict) – as well as the present Chapter.

many more towns had been founded since the Scramble for Africa after the Berlin Congress (1881). and – largely on the basis of the migratory influx of rural-born Africans – were already rapidly expanding as administrative, commercial and industrial or mining centres.

It was the time when now classic anthropological monographs on Africa were being written – but the study of African social change, even in a rural setting, was still largely relegated to afterthoughts, *after* ‘the main book’. African urban life posed enormous problems of conceptualisation and analysis to its early researchers, whose first field-work experience had normally been rural. The urban situation appeared to them as of a bewildering complexity – not unlike the experience of the urban migrants whom they followed to town from their respective rural homes. How could social research begin to capture that immense heterogeneity of regional, ethnic and cultural origins, and to see patterns of repetitive, institutionalised social relations, within the towns, and between the towns and the rural communities that fed them with people, food and no doubt also, to a large extent, with norms and beliefs? Anthropology had recognised that African village life was to a considerable – if initially exaggerated – extent organised in enduring, localised, culturally fairly homogeneous and corporate groups, which were largely conceptualised in a kinship idiom; in these groups, individuals were tied together through the converging effects of: *multiplex* (many-stranded)⁷⁹ and interdependent roles, a sense of community (as enforced by both ritual, a shared world-view, traditional politics and ethnic identity), and interlocking economic interests to be pursued within a limited rural space. If most of this seemed to be lacking in the emergent African urban society, what then constituted its structural features? Admittedly, general sociology had already offered dichotomies (such as Durkheim’s mechanical / organic solidarity – 1926 / 1883; or Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft* / *Gesellschaft*, 1887) that helped to impose a first ordering on the African urban data. But specifically urban interpretative models deriving from other, more urbanised continents were still in the process of being formulated for the first time. Despite the early theorising of Durkheim, Tönnies and others, it was only in the 1920s and ’30s that North Atlantic⁸⁰ urban life – the very cradle of the social sciences – was being empirically explored in detail so as to add concrete social descriptions to

⁷⁹ A common situation in traditional village environments, in Africa and elsewhere, is that one’s neighbour is also one’s consanguineal and affinal kinsmen; a member of one’s own clan or of a clan with which one has a recognised, specific historic relationship; a fellow-producer in the fields and the forests; a fellow-member of the councils and courts that regulate socio-political life at the local level; a fellow-member of the ritual groups that come together on a more or less regular basis. Clearly, the relationship between such neighbours is *many-stranded*. By contrast, the relationship between an urban street peddler and his customer is in principle single-stranded: it is a-typical (though not impossible) that urban peddler and customer are at the same time each other’s neighbours, go to the same church, *etc.*

⁸⁰ *I.e.* North American and North-Western European.

the generalisations highlighting the unique nature of urban mass society in the industrial modern world (e.g. Park *et al.* 1925; Wirth 1938; Warner & Lunt 1946; Warner after remote rural field-work among Aborigines turned to urban mass society).

The initial rural bias in African social studies, moreover, reflected both the demographic realities of African territories, and the preoccupations of Europeans as a dominant group in the colonial situation – a state of affairs which until the 1990s still had many parallels in South Africa. Virtually ever since the creation of modern states in Africa, administrators have worried about urban influx control, sanitation, building regulations, crime, and about the threat an urban *Lumpenproletariat* (or whatever racist equivalent term was employed) would pose to the political *status quo*; by contrast, how much more manageable African village society (even though reduced to stereotypes) appeared to be! Also, colonial industrialists, with the freedom accorded them by the European administrators, found it eminently profitable to regard even Africans in towns as displaced villagers – whose labour power had to be produced and reproduced in distant villages at no cost whatsoever to the urban capitalist sector, who therefore had to be considered as bachelors without financial responsibilities beyond keeping up their own personal labour power, and who (ideally) were only tolerated (in ways highly controlled by pass laws, residential segregation etc.) in town, under minimal conditions of housing and income, for as long as their labour could be directly subjected to industrial exploitation.⁸¹ It all chimed in with charitable and Christian-missionary stereotypes of the deplorable, uprooted, morally-disorientated rural stranger, in the (African) city which attracted all the negative connotations of Babel, Sodom and Gomorra, – such a far cry from the Arcadian image of Christian life around the rural missions in Africa.⁸²

If urban researchers could increasingly resist (e.g. the Manchester School) these ideological pressures as deriving from Western interests, they could often not resist some professional vicarious identification with African rural life.⁸³ For a long time, towns would continue to be seen as, for Africans, *the wrong place to be in*.

In addition to these ideological problems, the emergent African urban sociology found practical difficulties on its way. In the towns, the African inhabitants were subjected (more directly and more effectively than in most village settings) to the humiliating systems of administrative and police control, spatial segregation and economic exploitation typical of colonialism and industrial capitalism (cf. Gluckman 1971). While this brought them geographically close to social research-

⁸¹ Cf. Meillassoux 1975; Gerold-Scheepers & van Binsbergen 1978.

⁸² For views on actual conditions prevailing among migrant workers, see, for instance, van Onselen 1976, 1978, and the other contributions to Phimister & van Onselen 1978. For a typical, if rather sophisticated, early statement of *the missionary position*, by and large critical of these conditions, cf. Merle-Davis 1933. Also cf. Alan Paton's (1948) justifiably famous novel *Cry the beloved country*, where urban South Africa in the interbellum is treated in this light.

⁸³ As late as the 1960s, Gutkind (1968) argued against the 'one-visit-to-an-urban-area-approach'.

ers, it tended to create strong social and administrative boundaries difficult to cross except by the most indirect types of social research. Right up to the end of the colonial period, prolonged participant observation on the basis of the researcher's co-residence, commensality and proficiency in an African language – however much a standard technique of long standing in rural social studies – remained an exception in African urban studies. Instead, urban researchers tended to work from their offices and to largely rely on African assistants and on survey techniques. Meanwhile, the other side of this medal was that the European populations of African towns in the colonial era managed, for obvious reasons of political dominance, to keep social researchers away from their own ornate doorsteps. It was only gradually, and mainly after Independence, that the social sciences built up an analytical and theoretical understanding of the nature of colonial domination and of the roles of social research in that context; and until today the urban elites of European extraction in Africa have constituted something of a relative blind spot in the sociological literature.

The adoption of quantitative research methods did have a certain advantage. It acknowledged, and rendered visible, the broad statistical aggregates that (as regional and linguistic clusters, occupational groups, emergent social classes and status groups, and as religious, political, ethnic and recreational voluntary associations) make up the backbone of urban society in the first place. Already the simple decision to use a questionnaire approach meant that the classic units of study of rural-based anthropology (village, kin group, clan, 'tribe') were replaced, not in the first place by urban collectivities such as the ward, the workplace, the trade union, the urban district (although there have been numerous studies of those), but by the human *individual*: the respondent who, as urbanite or urban migrant, appeared to form the basic constituent *atom* of urban social life, with all sorts of attributes (sex, age, income, personal migration and labour history, *etc.*) which it was considered meaningful to assess in great detail. The subsequent exponential growth of quantitative methods in general sociology, as well as the emphasis on *methodological individualism* in the 1960s,⁸⁴ only reinforced this trend in African urban research.

Such survey approaches may bring out relevant social-structural attributes of individuals as exponents of broad social-structural aggregates, but they are not

⁸⁴ Methodological individualism (*cf.* Lukes 1970; Agassi 1960; Cramer 2002) is a social-science research perspective in which only the perceptions, motivations and actions of concrete human individuals are taken into consideration as grounds for the explanation of social phenomena, and all reliance is shunned on explanations in terms of enduring structural conditions whose existence and nature escapes partly or even wholly the consciousness of the actors concerned. Methodological individualism, with emphasis on individual agency, transaction, manipulation, and the inchoate and ephemeral nature of social structure, arose in the mid-20th c. CE in reaction to structural-functionalism and Marxism, where explanation largely relies on structure. In many ways, the Manchester School implicitly championed methodological individualism and was weary of long-term structural explanations; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2007a.

particularly suited for the identification and analysis of *social relationships* of a more subtle and personal nature, nor do they throw in relief the evolution of such relationships over time, let alone that they offer rich and valid insights in such themes as identity, ethnicity, and reference-group behaviour. Yet it is primarily in a context of enduring social relationships that individual attributes acquire their actual, varying sociological significance. For instance, the townsman's⁸⁵ 'cash income' features in virtually every urban survey. The meaning of the amounts stated and proudly reported, becomes however very problematic indeed, once we realise that the money involved is earned, shared, distributed, invested, donated, dissipated, augmented, dissimulated, subjected to inter-gender dynamics, insured, exchanged for prestations⁸⁶ in kind, or alienated, as the case may be, in very complex social processes that scarcely become discernable through a survey approach, and that certainly do not stop at the (none too unambiguous) confines of the urban household. On the contrary, the urban migrant's network of financial transactions involves – in addition to neighbours, friends, and townsmen of the same ethnic and regional origins – both formal and informal sectors of the urban economy, rotating credit associations, the interaction (for housing, employment, patronage, political support) of people from various classes, as well as those 'back home', in the villages and the small home-towns of origin. Against this background, 'cash income' as an entry in a questionnaire, even assuming (and on what grounds?) that any figure stated is formally correct and complete – is only a very first step in assessing patterns of consumption, poverty, unemployment, clientship and entrepreneurship, in short: urban survival and its strategies. These more complex underlying aspects are not totally beyond the grasp of quantitative methods, but participant observation has proven to yield much richer and more profound insights on this point.

To regard the African townsman as a social atom and nothing more means yielding to stereotypical conceptions that stripped the social dimension off Africans – in an attempt to reduce them to the powerless, resourceless pawns, without past nor future, that colonial bureaucrats and capitalists hoped they could become and remain.⁸⁷ However, it is precisely in the specific social rela-

⁸⁵ Throughout my argument treated as male for stylistic convenience only.

⁸⁶ '...[T]he action of paying, in money or service, what is due by law or custom, or feudally; a payment or the performance of a service so imposed or exacted; also, the performance of something promised' – Onions 1978: 1663.

⁸⁷ For a related critique of the 'atomised' African townsman, cf. Mitchell 1960. I remember South-Africa-born Clyde Mitchell, whose work I have known very well and have greatly admired, taking considerable offence and accusing me of unfairness, when, at a UK anthropological conference in the 1970s, I pointed out what I saw as the atomistic implications of even his own relatively subtle and sophisticated approach to African urban ethnicity. Yet unmistakably his work on the Zambian Copperbelt had to largely rely, too, on other methods of urban research than direct participant observation through co-residence, and while innovative and seminal (especially in its stress on networks and ethnic classification systems; Mitchell 1956, 1969) seldom

tionships of African town life that lie the roots of economic, cultural and political organisation through which urban migrants have managed to survive in an initially inimical environment. And usually these forms of urban social organisation, far from copying pre-existing rural-African, or North Atlantic, models, were forged by townsmen in the course of fascinating processes of trial and error. *The towns of Africa are truly laboratories of sociological experiment and innovation.* It is also here that we can begin to understand how – more in general – African townsmen have proudly shaped their ethnically and linguistically converging forms of urban life, moulding the multi-ethnic influx of migrants into a viable urban society where formal and informal norms of conduct, patterns of experience, and sources of identification and mobilisation, are widely shared across ethnic and regional divisions. On these bases they have selectively and creatively negotiated the cultural heritage and social ties that refer to their rural backgrounds, and have asserted themselves in the face of the modern state and municipal authorities.

Still, one needs both the quantitative and the qualitative approach. Survey techniques have turned out to be particularly useful when they have approached the townsman at the crucial point of transition: when he is in the process of crossing over from the rural situation and of *becoming* a townsman – in other words, with regard to the process of *urbanisation*. Admittedly the urban migrant turns out to be received and incorporated in a viable structure of urban social relations – without which he could hardly find an urban foothold in the first place; however, it cannot be denied that in taking leave from his rural social environment he has asserted himself as an individual, reshuffling and redefining, if not tearing loose from, his rural relationships, and entering a new world for which his rural upbringing had but ill prepared him. Here a study of individual characteristics, attributes and attitudes such as could be measured by a questionnaire in a formalised interview setting does make sense.

Urbanisation studies, for decades a dominant field in African urban studies, have however been somewhat slow to shed their original, misplaced wonder as to what Africans ‘were for goodness’ sake *doing* in towns? – implying that they had better stay ‘at home’: in the villages – the very social environments for which classic anthropology had after all devised such convenient analytical and methodological approaches. Likewise, the emphasis on urban migrants’ individual attributes, motivations and aspirations (in short the ‘social atom’ element) in survey-based urbanisation studies, may not have taken sufficient distance from the capitalist / colonial ideological constructs concerning African townsmen as indicated above. There is a connection here between questionnaire surveys and *methodological individualism* (as a rather too obvious context in which to interpret the findings of such surveys), on the one hand (*cf.* van

(however, see Mitchell 1965) conveys the sense of urban Africa as a life world constituted by meaningful and dynamic personal relationships.

Binsbergen 1977), – and, on the other hand, the politically and economically desirable image of the fragmented, atomised urban man, the worker in mine barracks and highly policed ‘compounds’, the loner whose dependants are unwelcome in town and therefore officially denied out of all existence, the client of bureaucratic agencies of the colonial and post-colonial state. Questionnaires, if administered in a sophisticated manner, may provide us with profiles of aggregate individuals, but they are not the most obvious or valid instruments to understand, let alone share in, the eagerness, warmth, pride and dignity of African town life, its capacity for social and cultural experiment and for political protest and mobilisation.

Qualitative research has shown the importance of enduring relationships which

- (a) provide an ethnically- or regionally-based reception structure for arriving migrants,
- (b) identify and access economic opportunities and administrative / political support, and
- (c) maintain social control among urban migrants both within the urban situation and as regards the continued observance of both economic and symbolic obligations towards the rural home.

All this is part and parcel of the individual process of becoming a townsman, as well as of the institutionalised structure of town life.

In this light, urbanisation not so much precedes, but in itself forms only one specific aspect of, the *urbanism* (Wirth 1938; cf. Park *et al.* 1925) with which it is so often contrasted: *the social-structural and cultural arrangements that allow people to be townsmen, to identify as such, and to maintain, together with other townsmen, the imperfect order of town life.* Along these lines urban sociology has come to appreciate town life in its own right, with its own cultural and organisational dynamics, its own creativeness. The African townsman is not a free (and stray) social atom but a participant in cross-cutting personal and group relations that shape and give meaning to his urban life, and link it with the life of a household, kinsfolk both in town and in a rural area of origin, a personal network of friends, neighbours and colleagues, an ethnic group, a professional organisation, a religious body, a political party and its leaders, the nation as a whole.

In less than three quarters of a century, and attempting to keep pace with the spectacular urban growth in Africa, African urban studies have consolidated themselves as a viable sub-discipline along lines which – for reasons of space – can only be indicated here in the most cursory way. The initial preoccupation with urbanisation (a logical bridge to that other sub-discipline, African migration studies) has broadened to a more comprehensive study of the forms, structures and processes of urban society. ‘The struggle for the city’⁸⁸ can be said to have

⁸⁸ Cf. Cooper 1983; but there the struggle for the city is not between academicians, but between

revolved on the question as to how much of a rural and traditionalist framework researchers were allowed to discard in their approach to African urban phenomena – and this battle was won (perhaps prematurely so, see below) by those who insisted on studying the city as a separate social field in its own right.

Also in other ways the sub-discipline has undergone significant changes. In terms of its personnel, one can point to a substantial number of senior *African* researchers in this field, and in general to the emergence of fully-fledged *urban* researchers, whose first research commitment has been to the city and not to a rural area. In terms of content there has been an impressive accumulation of insights.⁸⁹ Still in the 1960s, Schwab (1967) could express amazement at the low level of theoretical sophistication in this field. Since, significant advances have been made in this respect, for instance with regard to urban ethnicity,⁹⁰ urban kinship (Epstein 1981), and urban social classes (Lloyd 1974). The concept of the *social network*, and the formal methods propounded to study them, threw much light on interpersonal, optional and sometimes evasive dynamics of urban social relationships, and the ways in which these shaped economic, ethnic, kin, and political relations both in town and between the town and the rural home (Mitchell 1969). Especially in the initial euphoria of network analysis this approach was suggested to offer a definitive answer to the question as to what constituted, in the urban social process at the face-to-face level, the structural equivalents of the enduring social relationships that make up African village life. The sociological implications (in terms of class, proletarianisation, consciousness, mobilisation and protest) of the economic role of African cities (*cf.* Epstein 1958 – among many others) were further thrown in relief when under the influence of Marxist approaches they could be seen as the major loci from where industrial capitalism as a dominant mode of production was imposed in the periphery of the world system. Studies of urban-rural relations, including the continued partial reliance of urban migrants on their village and small-town homes and on the latter's economy and symbolic order, came to be understood in a framework of the articulation of modes of production and the incomplete proletarianisation of these migrants (van Binsbergen 1981: ch. 7, 1980c, 1985c). Along similar lines, *women's predicament*⁹¹ could be understood in terms of their access to production and circulation in town, highlighting the specific forms of male appropriation and control which the urban situation either imposed upon women or helped women to escape from.

Another aspect of African towns which had received much initial attention

the state, capital and migrant workers.

⁸⁹ *E.g.* Mitchell 1966; Miner 1967; Gutkind 1974; Parkin 1975; Peil & Sada 1984; Nuttall & Michaels 2000; Ferguson 1999.

⁹⁰ *E.g.* Mitchell 1970; Cohen 1969, 1974; Mafeje 1971.

⁹¹ *Cf.* Little 1973, 1980; Cooper 1979; Todes & Walker 1992; Hansen 1996, 1987; Robertson 1984; Werthmann 2002; Sheldon 1996; Wilson 1991.

gradually became less prominent a topic: *urban voluntary associations* (Little 1965; Epstein 1967). These were somehow comparable with network relations in that they appeared to constitute a typical urban, optional, *achieved*,⁹² *single-stranded* form of social organisation, with obvious applications in the ethnic and economic fields. However, the essential difference is that voluntary associations tend to take a formal organisational shape, acquiring an existence far more external to the individual actor, and with possibilities of group mobilisation, collective action and meta-personal continuity, that are per definition lacking in the personal network. In fact, association studies of African towns have continued until today but under new headings – headings that specifically signal the major voluntary associations in which African townsmen engage: Christian churches and Islamic brotherhoods, political parties, women's organisations, and, to an apparently lessening extent, ethnic and regional associations. These formal organisations are of course also to be found in rural Africa, weaving into village social structures, but their contribution to the social structure is greatest in town, where (contrary to the village situation) enduring historic institutions are largely absent. It is there that they continue to provide major settings for the interaction between, on the one hand, townsmen at the urban grassroots level, and, on the other, the modern state and broad international cultural and ideological movements. In these respects voluntary organisations may well be regarded as microcosms where basic features of the macrocosm of modern society⁹³ are made available at the grassroots level, for townsmen to familiarise themselves with, to experiment with, and perhaps to apply to their own benefit (Parkin 1966). These associations, therefore, are among the major mechanisms of the penetration of the colonial and post-colonial state in urban settings – but also the cradles of nationalism and the struggle for Independence.

In modern African studies, the unmistakable trend towards inter-disciplinary convergence on a regional or continental basis appears to go somewhat at the expense of theoretical and methodological solidity and depth. Preoccupations with power, control, class, adaptation, survival, material improvement, emancipation, protest, liberation and identity, may be profitably blended with an awareness of the cultural dynamics through which, foremost in Africa's rapidly growing cities, popular culture – even if thoroughly affected by international digital commoditification and other aspects of globalisation – is offering crea-

⁹² A common distinction in social science has been that between ascribed and achieved status. Being born as a member of a family, or class, or a category of people holding hereditary claim to specific ritual office is an ascribed status; being a member of a soccer team, having risen to middle-class status from a working-class background, or being a prophet on the basis of claimed or attributed divine election, dreams and messages, are achieved status.

⁹³ Such as: bureaucratic structures and the authority that underpins them, formal status hierarchies, and the legal and organisational uses of literacy; cf. Tiger 1967.

tive syntheses between the African tradition and the modern state.⁹⁴

While this invites further exploration of the more symbolic aspects of urbanism, one could, ironically, suggest that the 'struggle for the city' has been a little too successful. Gluckman's (1960: 57) famous adage

'the African townsman is a townsman'⁹⁵

was timely, but it also helped to bring about the situation that, even today, the interpenetration of rural and urban life, whilst a central datum of African sociology, also remains one of its greatest puzzles. There is reason to believe that sociologists of African towns have still not sufficiently problematised the urban / rural dichotomy; instead, they have tended to endow that dichotomy with a rigidity and the pretence of explanatory power that is rather defeated by the pragmatic ease with which African townsmen themselves are moving all the time between the rural and the urban poles of their existence. Urban migrants manage to keep up rural ties and often return to rural residence in the end. Townsmen pattern their family life, their production and consumption, somehow, however distantly and selectively, after cultural (*e.g.* kinship, patronage, ritual) notions deriving from their distant homes. And urban ethnicity, although far from a restaging of rural life and certainly not based on 'primordial attachments', has turned out to be a much more comprehensive and enduring phenomenon than merely a situational labelling exercise in the recruitment of network partners (as suggested in Mitchell's and Epstein's early studies on the Zambian Copperbelt). Rural culture never functions in an unselected and untransformed capacity in an urban environment (Mitchell 1956), but the rules and mechanisms of the process of urban / rural continuity are still far from clear. Nor is this only a question of specific ethnic groups: also the nature of the (conceptual, interactional) *boundaries* between urban ethnic groups needs to be much problematised and drawn within the proper, situational perspective. For there is unmistakably a convergence and coalescence, across urban ethnic groups, of neo-traditional cultural notions in the fields of kinship, sexual relations, law and order – so that also in multi-ethnic situations, such topics as the terms of oral contracts, marriage problems, sexual offences, sorcery accusations *etc.*, can be discussed and even taken to court despite the apparent diversity of the cultural and linguistic background of the various urban actors involved. In other words, thrown together as urban neighbours and fellow-inhabitants of the same urban district, heterogeneous African urbanites need to experiment

⁹⁴ It is this awareness of the strategic place of towns as interfaces between global modernity and regional tradition, which prompted my Francistown research in Botswana from the late 1980s, and propelled me, as a serendipity leading apparently away from modernity, to *sangomahood*, the study of divination, and intercultural philosophy.

⁹⁵ And not a displaced villager or tribesman – but on the contrary 'detrribalised' as soon as he leaves his village (Gluckman 1945: 12); the 1945 date shows that these ideas have percolated in African urban studies long before 1960.

not only with a *lingua franca* in the literal sense, but also with generalised, interethnic forms of discourse (e.g. relating to propriety, decency, sexuality, witchcraft) not provided for within their respective, specific ethnic rural background cultures, and improvised and negotiated in the form of a creative urban response. This is also an aspect of urbanism, but one that is so much predicated⁹⁶ on rural givens that Gluckman's adage will have to be taken with a pinch of salt.

Most African countries gained Independence in the early 1960s. A quarter of a century later developments in digital and consumer technology, and in the organisation of international banking and industry, brought the forces of globalisation to work, not only in the North Atlantic and in other metropolitan centres of the world, but also in Africa, and particularly through the interface which African cities constituted. Globalisation in Africa is the true focus in this Chapter: let us now investigate to what extent the concept of *virtuality* offers us a better clue to an understanding of the problems of urban-rural conceptualisation and meaning indicated as unresolved above.

1.1. Globalisation, boundaries, and identity

1.1.1. Introduction

Towards the end of the first international conference to be organised by the Dutch WOTRO national research programme on 'Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities', the prominent Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz took the opportunity of stressing the need for further conceptual development, not just in the case of the Dutch programme but in that of globalisation studies in general. The present Chapter is an attempt on my part to take up that challenge. While situated against the background of a rapidly growing social-science literature on globalisation,⁹⁷ my aim is not to review that literature in its impressive scope and depth; rather more modestly, I have let myself be inspired by a series of discussions and presentations within the programme

⁹⁶ Southall (1961: 6 f.) already pointed out that in this respect there are significant differences between African towns. Nonetheless, prominent authors at the time applauded Gluckman's approach to African urbanism, cf. Mayer 1962; Epstein 1967; Parkin 1969; Banton 1973; for an African critique, however, Magubane 1973.

⁹⁷ Cf. Fardon 1995; Featherstone 1990; Forster 1987; Friedman 1995; Hannerz 1992a; and references cited there. Some of the underlying ideas have been expressed decades ago, e.g. Baudrillard 1972, 1981. Or let us remember that, on the authority of Marshal McLuhan (1966), the thought that the world was becoming a 'global village' was a truism throughout the 1980s. In fact, work by Toynbee (1952: 134-5) and his great example Spengler (1993) can be cited to show that the idea of a global confrontation of cultures, with global cultural coalescence as a possible outcome, has been in the air throughout the twentieth century CE. Meanwhile notions of coalescence have alternated with notions of insurmountable global contradiction and conflict, as in Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1996).

and within the wider intellectual framework of Dutch anthropology.

I concentrate on virtuality, which I have come to regard as one of the key concepts for a characterisation and understanding of the forms of globalisation in Africa. Sections 1.1 and 1.2 are taken up defining virtuality and globalisation and provisionally indicating their theoretical relationship. The problematic heritage of a locality-obsessed anthropological tradition provides the analytical framework within which virtuality makes an inspiring topic, as argued in Section 1.3. The fourth Section (1.4) offers a transition from the theory to the empirical case studies, by examining the problem of meaning in the African urban environment. In the fifth Section (1.5) I proceed from the general theory of meaning to a specific application to the problem of meaning in African towns today. Next (1.6) I evoke an ethnographic situation (urban puberty rites in Zambia today) that illustrates particular forms of virtuality as part of the globalisation process. Section 1.7 applies the emerging insights in virtuality and the virtual village to René Devisch's notion of villagisation as a major process of societal transformation in the Democratic Republic Congo's capital city of Kinshasa. Section 1.8 explores the applicability of the same concepts to recent patterns of witchcraft and healing as studied, at the national level in Cameroon and Malawi, by Peter Geschiere and Matthew Schoffeleers respectively. My own work on the Kazanga festival as an instance of virtuality in the rural context is summarised in Section 1.9, after which a short conclusion rounds off this Chapter's argument.

True to the Manchester / Rhodes-Livingstone tradition by which it was largely fed, my field-work career has oscillated between urban and rural African settings, and I realise of course that African towns have always been a context for cosmopolitan meaning which does not stem from the villages in the rural region surrounding the town, but reflects, and is reflected in, the world at large. Yet I have decided to dwell here upon problems of meaning which – under the heading of virtuality – can only be formulated (even if their solution calls for a much broader geographical scope) when we look upon globalisation from the vantage point of the African village and its largely internal processes of signification.

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

1.1.2. The globalisation process

In the final analysis, globalisation is a consequence of the mathematical properties of the shape of the earth's surface. Globalisation is primarily the socio-cultural implication of the mathematical properties of the earth's surface, notably the fact that from any spot on that surface any other point can be reached, while (provided the journey is continued for long enough in the same direction) the ultimate destination will be the point of departure; ultimately, in other words, the entire surface will be covered. Yet it is important to also investigate the temporal dimension of the globalisation metaphor: the compressing

of time and of time costs⁹⁸ in relation to spatial displacement, as well as the meaning and the effects of such displacement. It is the interplay between the temporal and the spatial dimension which allows us to pinpoint why globalisation has taken on a substantially new shape in the last few decades. The shape of the earth has not noticeably changed over the few million years of man's existence on earth, and therefore human culture, or cultures, could perhaps be said to have always been subject to globalising tendencies.⁹⁹ But before the invention of the telegraph, the railroad, and the aeroplane the technology of time and space was in most parts of the world so limited that the effective social and cultural life world tended to be severely bound by geographical proximity. Most people would thus live in a world where localising tendencies would greatly outweigh whatever globalisation took place or came along. People, ideas, and goods did travel, and often across great distances, as the archaeological and historical record demonstrates. If writing and effective imperial organisation then created a continuous and more or less stable orientation across space and time, the conditions would be set for *early* or *proto-globalisation*,¹⁰⁰ characteristic of the communication technology of the mounted courier and the sailing boat. Where no such conditions prevailed, movement inevitably meant dissociating from the social setting of origin, and establishing a new local world elsewhere – a world usually no longer connected, through effective social interaction, with the one left behind, initially strongly reminiscent of the latter but decreasingly so – even in the case of nomadic cultures whose persistence in the face of spatial mobility has depended on their comparatively low investment in spatial attachment as an organising principle.

If today we have the feeling that globalisation amounts to a real and qualitative change that uniquely characterises the present-day condition, it is because of the hegemonic nature of capitalist technology, which has brought about unprecedented levels of mastery of space and time. When messages travel at light speed across the globe using electronic media, when therefore physical displacement is hardly needed for more or less effective communication yet such displacement can be effected within one or two days from anywhere on the

⁹⁸ Notions on space-time compression in globalisation are to be found with Harvey and Giddens, *e.g.* Harvey 1989; Giddens 1990, *cf.* 1991: 16 *f.* Some of my own work (1996b) suggests that we should not jump to the conclusion that such compression is uniquely related to the globalisation context. In fact, an argument leading through African divination systems and board-games right to the Neolithic suggests that such compression is an essential feature of both games and rituals throughout the last few millennia of human cultural history.

⁹⁹ For a similar view Friedman (*e.g.* 1995), who chides anthropology for having relegated other cultures to the status of isolated communities.

¹⁰⁰ In my own research I have particularly concentrated on proto-globalisation in the preceding few millennia, notably in the preceding Bronze Age Mediterranean (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011), board-games and geomantic divination (see Chapters 12 and 13 below, and extensive references there).

globe to anywhere else, and when the technology of manufacturing and distribution has developed to such levels that the same material environment using the same objects can be created and fitted out anywhere on the globe at will – then we have reduced the fees that time and space impose on the social process, to virtually zero. Then we can speak of globalisation in the true sense.

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

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

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

Today, an apparently unlimited and uncontrollable supply of intercontinentally mediated images, symbols, ideas and objects is swept across modern Africa by the media, commodity distribution, the educational services, cosmopolitan medicine and world religions. This calls for new identities. People seek to define new boundaries so as to create or salvage their identity in the face of this constant flow. By imposing boundaries they may either appropriate for themselves a specific part of the global supply, or protect themselves in order to keep part of the global flow at a safe distance. *Eddies of local particularism which*

come to life on either side of the massive stream of world-wide, universalising homogenisation – I think there is handy, albeit much simplified, image for you of the cultural globalisation process in Africa. Such boundaries are in part constructed by human thought: they are conceptual boundaries, collective ways of naming and classifying present-day reality: *e.g.* a classification in terms of ‘old-fashioned’ or ‘retarded’ versus ‘new’, modern’, ‘world standard’ of such a wide variety of cultural items as: dress styles; variation in speech behaviour; gendered, sexual and conjugal roles; conceptions of law and order; visions of cosmology and causality. However, in order to express such conceptual boundaries in the converging social behaviour of large numbers of people, it is necessary that they are mediated, or rather constructed and ever again re-constructed, in interaction; and for such interaction generating and maintaining boundaries, the new formal organisations of Africa constitute some of the most obvious contexts. Many researchers of globalisation and related topics therefore now define their research sites no longer in terms of localised communities but of formal organisations: churches, educational institutions, ethnic associations, sport associations *etc.*

1.1.4. An example: The religious laundering of globally mediated items

An understanding of the way in which such organisations create identity by imposing boundaries on the initially unlimited flow that globalisation entails, can for instance be gathered from the study of such a widespread phenomenon as the laundering of globally mediated commodities and of money in the context of present-day religious organisations. Many African Christian Churches appear¹⁰¹ as a context for the managing of elements belonging to the inimical domain of commodities, consumption and the market. But we should not overlook that very much the same process is at work outside world religions yet (inevitably, since the problem presupposes the clients’ extensive participation in the world economy) in a context of globalisation – among syncretistic or neo-traditional cults, which have their own forms of formal organisation. Here examples of such ritual laundering can be quoted from urban cultic practice among Surinam Creoles in the Netherlands and from an urban variety of sangoma mediumistic cults widespread in Southern Africa (*cf.* van Wetering 1988; van Binsbergen 1990).

If such organisations can selectively manage the global and construct a security screen of identity around their members, it is crucial for the development of my argument in this Chapter to realise that they are at least as effective in keeping

¹⁰¹ *E.g.* in the context of the work, within the WOTRO programme on ‘Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities’, on Ghanaian Pentecostal churches by Birgit Meyer and by Rijk van Dijk; for a comparable case from Southern Africa, *cf.* the Zion Christian Church as studied by Jean Comaroff, which started a debate about the political significance of these churches. *Cf.* van Dijk 1992; Meyer 1995; Comaroff 1985; Schoffeleers 1991; van Binsbergen 1993c; Werbner 1985, 1986.

the local out of their charmed circle of identity, or allowing the global in only at severe restrictions. There is a remarkable variation in the way in which local religious forms can be voiced in a context where globally mediated religious forms are clearly dominant. Here specific individual spirits are acknowledged and confronted, so that local identities (referring to the home village, the in-group, ancestors) remain part of the identity which is recognised to be ushered into the new Pentecostal environment. In Independent Churches in Francistown, Botswana, a very different situation obtains (van Binsbergen 1990, 1993c):

D. CHURCHES IN FRANCISTOWN, BOTSWANA. Admittedly, there is a large number of different churches at work on the Francistown scene, and although the liturgical and therapeutic style of most of them is remarkably similar, differences should not be ignored. My participant observation inevitably had to be limited to just a handful of such churches. Here at any rate ancestral spirits could only be mediated to the globally informed church environment in the most muted form possible: individual spirits were never named, but the church-goer (or in view of the fact that therapy is a prime motivation for church-going, 'patient' would be an appropriate designation) would collapse, moan and scream inarticulately, no attempt would be undertaken to name the troubling spirit and identify it in the patient's genealogy – its suppression and dispelling was the church leadership's recognised task.¹⁰²

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

¹⁰² Such mutedness may be also recognised in the *Wosanna* variant of the Southern African *sangoma* cult, where the adepts (contrary to the ancestral variant) do not ritually dance and sing, but when in trance display a catatonic, silent perplexity. Both variants may be found within the same cultic lodge, as was the case in MmaShakayile's lodge at Monarch township, Francistown, where I received most of my own *sangoma* training; here the lodge owner's daughter was the principal representative of the *Wosanna* variant. Elsewhere I have gone into the question whether the name *Wosanna* derives from the Biblical *hosanna* as a pious expression of adoration (van Binsbergen 2003b: 167 n. 1).

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

Creating identity – ‘a place to feel at home’, to borrow Welbourn & Ogot’s apt expression first applied to Independent Churches in Western Kenya,¹⁰³ – means that the church members engage in a social process that allows them, by the management of boundaries and the positioning of people, ideas and objects within and outside these boundaries, to create a new community which in principle is independent from whatever pre-existing community attachments the people involved may have had on the basis of their kinship affiliations, rural homes, ethnic or political affiliations. How can we understand such a home outside home? The new home made afresh on the basis of chosen attachments in a voluntary association, often in a new social and geographical environment, partly disqualifies the old home, yet reminds of it and from this reminder derives part of its meaning and emotional satisfaction. The concept of virtuality helps us to understand these important operations in the domain of identity and self-organisation.

However, before we can meaningfully discuss the virtualisation of meaning in the context of globalisation, let us first consider the concept of meaning with more than the standard ethnographer’s empiricist naïveté.

1.2. Introducing virtuality

1.2.1. Virtuality provisionally defined

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

The terms *virtual* and *virtuality* have a well-defined and illuminating history, which in its broad sweep of space and time, its multi-lingual aspect and its repeated changes of meaning and context, reminds us of the very globalisation process we seek to illuminate by the use of these terms.

Non-existent in classical Latin (although obviously inspired by the word *virtus* there), they are late-medieval neologisms, whose invention became necessary when, partly via Arabic versions of Aristotle’s works, his Greek concept of δύναμις *dunamis* (‘potentiality, power, quadrate’) had to be translated into

¹⁰³ Welbourn & Ogot 1966; for an application of this concept to urban Zambia, cf. van Binsbergen 2000 *f.*

Latin.¹⁰⁴

The authoritative Greek dictionary by Liddell & Scott (1897, s.v. δύναμις, p. 389) lists the following Aristotelian uses:

or *value* of money, Thuc. 6. 46, cf. 2. 97, Plut. Lyc. 9, Sol. 15. **IV.** a *capability of existing or acting, virtual existence or action*, Lat. *potentia*, as opp. to actual (*ἐνέργεια, ἐντελέχεια*, Arist. *Metaph.* 8. 6, 9): hence *δυνάμει*, as Adv. *virtually, ὑπερον ὄν τῆ τάξει, πρότερον τῆ δυνάμει* .. ἐστὶ Dem. 32. 19; opp. to *ἐνέργεια* (*actually*, Lat. *actu*), Arist. *An. Post.* 1. 24, fin.; or to *ἐντελεχεία*, Id. *Metaph.* 3. 5, 1, al.; v. *ἐνέργεια* II. **V.** as Mathem. term, *potentia*, in *Geometry, the side of a square*, and in *Arithm. the square root*, which being multiplied into itself

A more structured overview may be found with Flamböck 1972:

‘Aristoteles gebraucht *D[unamis, δύναμις]* in zwei Hauptbedeutungen. Erstens und zunächst ist *D[unamis]* ‘der Ursprung einer Veränderung (...) in einem anderen oder als ein anderes.’¹⁰⁵ Da nun zu diesem Vermögen des Bewirkens gleichursprünglich das Vermögen des Erleidens gehört, ‘der im Leidenden selbst vorhandene Ursprung einer leidenden Veränderung durch ein anderes oder als ein anderes’,¹⁰⁶ gelangt Aristoteles von dem *kinetischen D[unamis]*-Begriff zweitens zu dem ihm spezifischen *ontologischen D[unamis]*-Begriff, indem er diese Bestimmung als eine eigentümliche Seinsweise insbesondere der ὕλη (des Stoffes)¹⁰⁷ auffaßt. Etwas ist etwas dann ‘dem Vermögen (bzw. der Möglichkeit) nach’ (*δυνάμει*), wenn es ‘schon durch den ihm eigenen Ursprung ein solches ist’.¹⁰⁸ Den genaueren Sinn empfängt *D[unamis]* in dieser Bedeutung von den zugeordneten Begriffen *Energeia* und *Entelecheia*.’ (Flamböck 1972: col. 304)

An exhaustive overview of Aristotle’s manifold and multivariuous use of the term *δύναμις*, with all attestations referenced in detail, may be found in Aristoteles 1831, ‘Index’, s.v. δύναμις, pp. V, 206-208.

While the Scholastic / Aristotelian philosophy, with its emphasis on general potential to be realised in the concrete, gradually retreated from most domains of North Atlantic intellectual life, the terms found refuge (largely at the initiative of G.W. von Leibniz) in the expanding field of physics, where virtual velocity, virtual moment, virtual work were to become established concepts around 1800. This was a century after optics had formulated the theory of the ‘virtual image’: the objects shown in a mirror image do not really exist, but they are merely illusory representations, which we apparently observe at the end of the refracted light beams connecting the object, the surface of the mirror, and our eye. In our age of information technology the term ‘virtual’ has gained a new lease of

¹⁰⁴ Hoenen 1947: 326, n 1; Little *et al.* 1978, s.v. ‘virtual’.

¹⁰⁵ *Arist., Met[aphysica]*. IV, 12, 1019 a 15 f. 1020 a 5 f.; VIII, 1, 1046 a 10 f. [original footnote]

¹⁰⁶ *Met.* VIII, 1, 1046 A 11 f. [original footnote]

¹⁰⁷ *E.g. Met.* VII, 2, 1042 B 9; XI, 5, 1071 A 9. [original footnote]

¹⁰⁸ *Met.* VIII, 7, 1049 A 16. [original footnote]

life,¹⁰⁹ which takes its cue from the meaning given to the term in optics.

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

But the applicability of the concept of ‘virtuality’ extends further. Drawing on a notion of ‘virtual discourse’ which while allegedly inspired by Foucault (1966) is in fact equivalent to that of performative discourse in Analytical philosophy,¹¹⁰ Jules-Rosette (1996) in a splendid paper reserves the notion of virtuality for a specific discursive situation: the

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

which play a central role in the construction of post-colonial identity:

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

This allows her to link the specific form of post-colonial political discourse in the Democratic Republic Congo (for a strikingly similar example from Nigeria under President Babangida, *cf.* Apter 1996) to the macro-economic predicament of Africa in the 1980s and 1990s, of which the elusive magic of money then emerges as the central symbol.

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

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

¹⁰⁹ *E.g.*, IBM 1987 lists as many as 56 entries starting on ‘virtual’.

¹¹⁰ *Cf.* Austin 1962: statements which cannot be true or false, *e.g.* exhortations, or the expression of an ideal or an intention.

offer imaginations in their search for political subjects. This indicates a new stage in the dialectic of disenchantment and mystification. While capitalism disenchanting morality and substituted it with the magic of commodities and technology (*Verdinglichung*), today commodity fetishism is substituted by post-modern virtual realities. (...) Appadurai (1990) mentions in a similar vein ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapes, financescapas and ideoscapes. (...) As with commodities, these 'imagined worlds' and virtual realities develop their own dynamics and start to govern their creators for whom it is impossible to distinguish reality from virtuality. Just like Goethe says in the *Magician's Apprentice*: "Die Geister, die ich rief, die werd ich nicht mehr los".¹¹¹

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

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

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

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

Applying the above abstract definition, we may speak of virtuality when, in cases involving cultural material from a distant provenance in space or time or both, signification is *not* achieved through tautological, self-contained, reference to the local; therefore, such material is not incorporated and domesticated within a local cultural construct, and no meaningful contemporary symbolic connection can be established between these alien contents and other aspects of the local society and culture.

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

'Every human society has some sort of territorial structure. (...) This territorial structure provides the framework, not only for the political organisation (...), but for other

¹¹¹ Korff 1995: 5. On virtuality and related aspects of today's automated technology, also *cf.* Cheater 1995; Rheingold 1991.

forms of social organisation also, such as economic, for example. The system of local aggregation and segregation (...) is the basis of all social life.'

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

For the geographically near to become the local in the classic anthropological sense, we need to add an appeal to the *systemic nature of local culture*. This refers to the claim (usually highly exaggerated) that the constituent elements of culture hang together systematically, so that it is possible to reduce the culture to a far smaller number of elements and informing principles than the astronomical number of separate cultural events that take place, and material cultural objects that exist, among the set of people involved within a fairly limited space and time. Creolisation (cf. Hannerz 1987) then means, not that the systemic nature of local culture has been abandoned by the actors or destroyed by the onslaught of outside influences, but that that systemic nature only accounts for appreciably less than the entire culture: a considerable part falls outside the system. Such creolisation can be argued to be merely a specific form of virtuality: as a departure from the systemic nature of local culture. *If culture produces reality in the consciousness of the actors, then the reality produced under conditions of such departure is, to the extent to which it is virtual, only... virtual reality.*

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

Under modern conditions of both communication technology and the social engineering of self-organisation for identity, the socially local is not any longer, necessarily, the geographically near. We need a concept of social, cultural and identity space which (especially under conditions of 'zero time-fees', i.e. elec-

tronic globalisation) is carefully distinguished from geographical space – even although even the latter is, like that other Kantian *a-priori* category, *time*, far less self-evident and unchangeable than Kant, and naïve modern consumers of secondary school physics, would tend to believe. In the same way as the Euclidean two-dimensional geometry of the flat plane can be demonstrated to be only a special case of the immense variety of n-dimensional geometries which modern mathematics has come to conceive, the insistence on geographical propinquity as a prime determinant of social relations is merely a reflection of the state of communication technology prevailing, during much of humankind's history, in the hunting and herding camps and the farming villages that until only a few millennia ago were the standard human condition. As such it has been built into classic anthropology. Meanwhile, the distinction between social space and geographical space does not mean that the material technologies of geographical space have become irrelevant or non-existent in the face of the social technology of locality construction – a prudent approach to globalisation has to take account of both.

As advocated by Appadurai, we have to study in detail the processes through which localisation as a social process takes place. The local, in other words, is in itself a problem, not a given, let alone a solution. We need to study the process of the appropriation of globally available objects, images and ideas in a local context, which more often than not constitutes itself in the very process of such appropriation. Let us take our cue from the history of geomancy, a major family of divination systems found throughout Africa and in many other parts of the world, spread under conditions of 'proto-'globalisation (with the intermediate technology of seafaring, caravan trade and elite-restricted, pre-printing literacy).

E. GEOMANTIC DIVINATION AS A WELL-DEFINED FORMAL SYSTEM, WITH A VERY WIDE DISTRIBUTION IN SPACE AND TIME. Geomancy is not the vague *ominal* doctrine based on the perception of qualitative changes in the surface of the earth (as it was for the Roman writer Varro (1976), 1st century BCE, or for St Isidore, 560-636 CE (1911: s.v. 'geomantia', VIII, 9.13, p. 328).

Geomancy is the Latin term under which Europe, by means of translations from the Arabic, Hebrew and Persian, has appropriated a highly formalised divination systems whose original name was *'ilm ar-raml*, علم الرمل 'sand science'.¹¹² 'Sand science' is an astrologising form of divination, originating in Iraq c. 300 AH (early 9th century CE) under the influence of, of rather sharing common origins with, the Chinese cosmological classification and divination system 易經 *yì jīng* ('I Ching').

¹¹² And, incidentally, even in medieval Arabian culture such schemes were already highly virtual in that their symbolism and iconography did not derive from the local society of that time and age, but carried (in clearly demonstrable ways, open to the patient scrutiny of scholarship even though inviting, at the same time, the brooding fantasies of *New Age*) distant echoes of Hebrew, pre-Islamic Arabian, Old-Egyptian, North-West African, Sumerian, Akkadian, Indian, Iranian and Chinese systems of representation...

Geomancy spread over a large part of the Old World (*i.e.* Asia, Africa, Europe) in subsequent centuries. It is based on four parameters ('head', 'body', 'legs' and 'feet'), all of which can assume two different values: present or absent – as indicated by a dot, or a line (or double dot) in each of the four superimposed lines of which the standard geomantic sign consists.¹¹³ Especially in Africa, geomancy is very widespread; many authors consider it a major component of African philosophy and claim it to be an autochthonous African invention.¹¹⁴ In the light of comparative research the claim of an African origin is implausible, see van Binsbergen 2012d, and 2010b. Most probably, we need to distinguish two phases in the spread of geomancy:

- its emergence as a major cosmological and divinatory idiom in Neolithic West Asia (on the basis of a widespread elemental system of cyclical transformations), and its subsequent spread across the Old World, including China (probably in the Neolithic or Early Bronze Age) and also (probably the Late Bronze Age) into the Sahara and sub-Saharan Africa
- the development, on the basis of the conditions set out in the previous point, in Mesopotamia / Iraq, of *'ilm ar-raml*, and the latter's spread, in the course of the second millennium CE, into Africa, producing complex interaction and feedback effects with less formalised and non-astrological geomancies already in existence there.

This process produced the interpretative catalogues for all African divination systems based on a material apparatus producing 2n different configurations, such as Fa, Ifa, Sixteen Cowries, Sikidy, Four Tablets: illiterate African versions so elaborate and so saturated with local African imagery that they would appear to be authentically, autochthonously African. In the same way it can be demonstrated that the actual material apparatuses used in this connexion (tablets, divining boards, divining bowls), although conceived within an African iconography and carving techniques, and clad in awesome African mystery and imputed authenticity, in fact are largely the extreme localisations of the intercontinentally mediated scientific instruments (the sand board, the wax board, the lode compass, and the square wooden simplification of the astro-labe) of Greek, Arabian, and Chinese nautical specialists and scribes.

The example has considerable relevance, because here some of the main factors of globalisation and universalism (notably literate scholarship, empirical research and long-distance sea-faring), have rather ironically ended up as forms of the most entrenched, stereotypical African localisation and particularism.

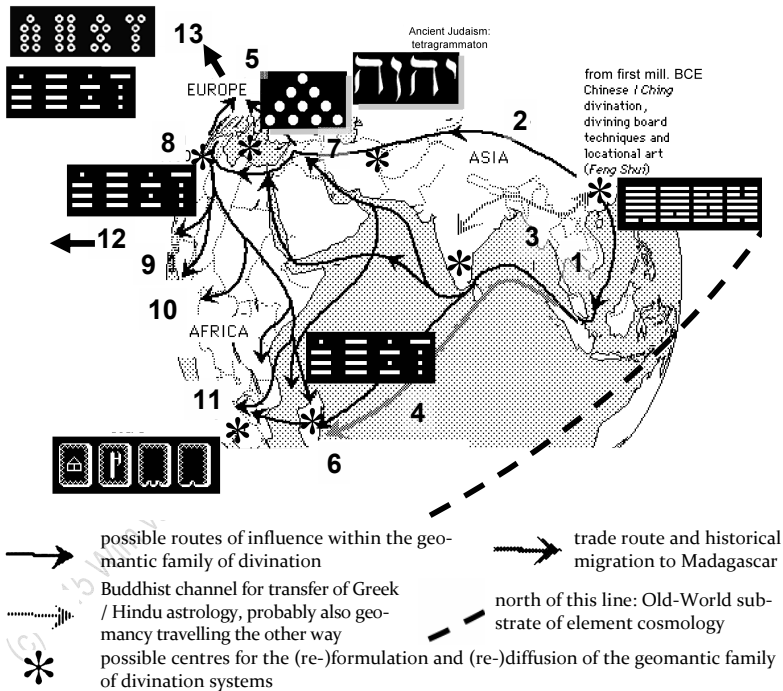
The hardest analytical and knowledge-political nut to crack is to explain why, and as a result of what ideological, social, economic, and technological mechanisms, such extreme localisation should appear to be more typical of sub-Saharan Africa than of other parts of the Old World in the second millennium CE. Does such a suggestion not amount to denying the cultural capability of Africans? Whatever of the original, distant contexts still clings to these localised African precipitates (the overall format of the apparatus, immutable but locally un-interpretable formal details such as isolated astrological terms and iconographic representations) amounts to virtuality and probably adds much to these systems' charisma (*cf.* van Binsbergen 1995c, 1995b, 1996c, 1996a).

¹¹³ *Cf.* Skinner 1980; van Binsbergen 1996c, 1996f 1997c, with extensive bibliography; also 2012d, 1996a, etc.

¹¹⁴ Apostel 1981: ch. vii: 'African geomancy, formal logic, and force metaphysics', pp. 214-244; Abimbola 1983; Abimbola 1975, also excerpted in: Abimbola 1991; Akiwowo 1983; Aromolaran 1992; Eze 1993; Makinde 1988; Bewaji 1994; Uyanne 1994.

Extreme localisation of outside influences, rendering them practically imperceptible and positioning them within the rural environment, although typical for much of Africa's history, is no longer the dominant form globalisation takes in Africa. Modern virtuality manifests itself through the incomplete systemic incorporation of cultural material which is both alien and recognised by the actors to be so, and which circulates not primarily in remote villages but in cities.

Examples of this form of virtuality are to be found all over Africa today, and in fact (in a way which would render a classic, holistic anthropological analysis nonsensical) they constitute the majority of cultural expressions: from world religions to party politics mediating world-wide models of formal organisation, development and democracy;¹⁵ from specialist production of present-day art,



1. Chinese 易經 *yì jīng* / *I Ching*, divining board techniques and locational art (風水 *Feng Shui*) as from 1st mill. BCE
2. Silk Road
3. Buddhist channel for transfer of Greek / Hindu astrology, perhaps geomancy travelling the other way (*i.e.* east-west)

¹⁵ Cf. van Binsbergen 1995a, where a cultural relativist argument on democracy is presented.

4. Trade route and historical migration (first millennium CE) from Indonesia to Madagascar
5. Pythagoreanism of the ancient Mediterranean; it is plausible that this belongs to this inter-continental system of interaction, but how remains unclear
6. *Sikidy* divination and Malagasy locational art
7. invention of *'ilm ar-raml* in the milieu of the *Iḥwān as-Safā* ('Brethren of Purity'),
اخوان الصفا, Baṣra, Persian Gulf, late 1st millennium CE
8. North African *'ilm ar-raml*, early 2nd millennium CE
9. Ifa, Sixteen Cowries: the elaborate geomantic systems of West Africa
10. Simplified geomancies of the African interior
11. Four-tablet divination and Venda divining board, Southern Africa, as from middle 2nd mill. CE
12. To the New World
13. Western Europe as from early second millennium CE (*Ars Geomantica*, *Punktierkunst*)

Fig. 1.1. Old-World geomantic systems.



belles lettres and philosophy inspired by cosmopolitan models, to the production – no longer self-evidently but, self-consciously, as a deliberate performance – of apparently local forms of music and dance during an ethnic festival like Kazanga in Western Zambia (van Binsbergen 1992a, 1994a); from fashionable lingerie to public bodily prudery demonstrably imposed by Christianity and Islam.

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

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

1.3. The virtual village: Characterising African village society as virtualised

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

It is necessary to dwell on this point, since (as I found out when presenting an earlier version of the present argument) it is capable of producing considerable confusion. Although there are notable exceptions,¹¹⁶ and although the Research Programme of which the present Chapter is a product was prompted by the determination to change that situation, it is true to say that most of the existing literature on globalisation was not written by established ethnographers of African rural life. The typical focus for globalisation studies is the metropolis, the self-evident access to international lifestyles mediated by electronic media, with a dominant presence of the state, the culture industry, and the communication industry. However, people born in African villages are now also being globalised, and an understanding of their experiences requires an analytical and descriptive grip on African rural social formations.

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

- reintroduce an emphasis on material production and appropriation;
- dissolve the assumed unitary nature of the local rural society into a handful of subsystems ('modes of production'), each with their own logic of exploitation and ideological legitimation, and linked together ('articulated') within the 'social formation', in such a way that the reproduction of one mode depends on the exploitation of another mode; and finally,
- provide a theoretical perspective which could account for the persistence and relative autonomy (also as 'logics' of signification and legitimation) of these various modes and their articulations, even under conditions of capitalism and the colonial or post-colonial state.

This reformulation of the classic anthropological perspective therefore could

¹¹⁶ Cf. the collections by Comaroff & Comaroff 1993 and Fardon 1995; moreover, Geschiere *c.s.* 1995; de Boeck 1996; Meyer 1995; Pels 1993; and perhaps my own work.

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

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

In this context (to attempt a definition of a word used too loosely in the argument so far), *the meaning of an element of the local society and culture consists in the network of referential relations at the centre of which such element is perceived and conceptualised by the participants; through this relational network the element is taken, by the actors, and explicitly or implicitly, as belonging to that general socio-cultural order, cognitively and emotively linked to many other aspects of that order – a condition which produces a sense of proper placement, connectivity and coherence, recognition, identity as a person and as a group, aesthetics, bodily comfort and even healing.*

Although apparently acceptable to a modern anthropological audience, such a definition of meaning remains idiosyncratic and arbitrary as long as it is not considered in the light of the numerous approaches to meaning throughout the history of philosophy and the social sciences. Let us stop a moment in order to cursorily sketch that history.

1.4. Some themes in the philosophy and cultural anthropology of 'meaning'.

In his cursory discussion of 'meaning' for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the

prominent American philosopher of knowledge Carl J. Hempel (1961) made the following illuminating distinctions:

“The term “meaning” is used in many different ways. These may be divided into three principal types:

1. as index or symptom of some occurrence;
2. meaning as intent or purpose of a deliberate action;
3. meaning as whatever is referred to, signified, or expressed by words or other symbols’.

In the present context of the production of anthropological knowledge, notably on the way in which the urban life is perceived as endowed with meaning for the actors involved, we are clearly concerned with (3). Heedful of the useful anthropological distinction between *emic* and *etic*, we may appreciate that, in fact, we are facing a multi-stage operation here:

- in the first place we need to establish empirically, at the *emic* level, through standard methods (notably participant observation, a questionnaire survey and/or in-depth interviews), what meanings the actors attach to important aspects of their urban experience;
- in the second place, we have to render those meanings in the specialist technical language used for anthropological reports; to the extent to which these actors’ meanings are explicitly expressed in language, they will be probably in a different language, and certainly in a different non-technical format, from the specialist technical language used for anthropological reports – and to the extent to which these actors’ meaning are not explicitly expressed in language, they must be gauged by indirect methods, and reconstructed in ethnographic language;
- thirdly, we have to take an analytical distance from these empirical reconstructions of the *emic* meanings, and try to interpret them, in an *etic* way, in terms derived from our theoretical understanding of the socio-cultural system at hand, *e.g.* by associating the meaning to socio-economic and political insecurity, identity constructs, kin obligations, the class structure, intergenerational tensions, aspirations of social mobility, changing norms and values, globalisation, *etc.*

In this difficult task, the anthropologist (usually implicitly) appeals in the first instance to

- (a) intersubjective, largely implicit, methods for the study of meaning circulating within the anthropological discipline; but at the background of such methods the philosopher detects
- (b) wider and more fundamental implications and challenges in the definition and handling of meaning, to which the ethnographer’s handwork is inevitably subject regardless of whether the latter is aware of that condition or not – usually the latter.

Let me first indicate, highly eclectically, some of the available philosophical positions, after which the anthropological approaches will be most cursorily discussed.

Needless to say that questions of meaning and interpretation are at the heart of any philosophy, and that it is far beyond the scope of the present book to try and present more than the most eclectic and superficial indication of this vast field of research. In the West, questions of meaning and interpretation were already occasionally raised in the context of Presocratic Greek philosophy.¹¹⁷ Also Socrates' philosophical 'obstetrics' (*i.e.* his method, much in the way of a midwife, of allowing an inkling of the truth to be born from insistent discussion) as described in Plato's dialogues (1975 / 4th c. BCE) largely revolved on questions of meaning and interpretation. However, a first monographic treatment was by Aristotle as part of his various efforts to create philosophical logic.¹¹⁸ Building on this foundation (which was reinforced when, with Aquinas, and under the impact of Arabian, Jewish and Byzantine scholarship, Aristotle came to replace Plato and St Augustine as the main philosophical authority of European philosophy in the Later Middle Ages), inevitably such questions were to play an important role throughout the history of Western philosophy from Antiquity to Early Modern times. Critical interpretation of the Bible and of Ancient Graeco-Roman texts, by such authors as Erasmus, Casaubon and de Spinoza, gradually gave rise to the *hermeneutics* that was to become a constant element in Western philosophy ever since Schleiermacher (1768-1834; *cf.* Palmer 1969). The fact that outside the North Atlantic region other religious and philosophical traditions have struggled with similar problems of interpretation, has given rise to interesting comparative studies.¹¹⁹ Hermeneutics attained a seminal form in Dilthey,¹²⁰ and also in Husserl,¹²¹ Levinas, and Derrida; the latter's works¹²² focus on deconstruction and *différance* as crucial operations in this connection. In the course of the 20th c. CE, the expanding hermeneutical tradition likewise informed the thought of Heidegger,¹²³ Gadamer (1965), and

¹¹⁷ *E.g.* Gill 2001; Cassirer 1941, who stresses such primal Ancient Greek concepts as λόγος *logos* 'word, argument, fact', δίκη *dikē* 'traditional practice', and κόσμος *kosmos* 'order, jewel'.

¹¹⁸ Aristotle 1938 / late 4th c. BCE, *Organon II: De Interpretatione*, *cf.* Aristoteles 1831: I, 16-24; Casas 2008 / 2007.

¹¹⁹ *E.g.* Pye & Morgan 1975; Farmer *et al.* 2002; Okolo 1980; Sharma 1969; Serequeberban 1994; Owolabi 2001; Sogolo 1987.

¹²⁰ Dilthey 1927, 1961; *cf.* Bulhof 1980; de Mul 1993; with major influence on Max Weber as one of the founding father of the social sciences.

¹²¹ Husserl 1900 / 1970a, 1965 - with the seminal theme of *intersubjectivity* -, 1969, 1970b; against with great influence on the social sciences despite Husserl's Eurocentricity, *cf.* Husserl 1970b; Held 1989; de Waelhens 1953; Beerling 1965; Dreyfus 1982; Michalsky 1997; Smith & McIntyre 1982; McIntyre & Smith 1976; Peperzak 1983; Ricoeur 1996; Kapsch 2007.

¹²² *E.g.* Derrida 1997 / 1967a, 1967b; also *cf.* Chapter 6, below.

¹²³ Heidegger 1977 / 1927-1928, 1985 / 1921-1922, / 1992, 1989.

Ricoeur.¹²⁴ Tangential to this movement has been the work of the neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer, which however, partly through its popularisation in the hands of Susanne K. Langer (see below), has had, in its turn, considerable impact on the social sciences as the basis for a widely adopted theory of symbols. Meanwhile, in addition to this Continental tradition, Anglo-Saxon 'Analytical' philosophy and its various predecessors¹²⁵ have also constituted a major growth point in the study of meaning and explanation, with such major contributors as Peirce;¹²⁶ Carnap (1942, 1975 / 1947); C.I. Lewis (1946); Quine;¹²⁷ Schlick 1949; Davidson (1984, with explicit reference to the social sciences); Hempel (1952, 1973); Putnam (1975, 1978); Shore 1996; and Skorupski 1999. In addition to all these incisive and illuminating discussions which, if properly taken into account in anthropological knowledge construction, would radically lift that discipline to an higher level of sophistication and relevance, this line of work has also produced the remarkable 'principle of charity'¹²⁸ which, when applied in intercultural settings, advocates the plausibility even of forms of others' knowledges that by one's own cultural orientation would appear to be unjustified hence untrue and undeserving of the term 'knowledge'.

To the anthropological discipline's focus on language,¹²⁹ and on understanding / *Verstehen*¹³⁰ a local socio-cultural system on the basis of prolonged participant observation,¹³¹ post-World-War II anthropology added the inspiration of the said Kantianist symbol analysis mediated via Langer;¹³² and philosophical hermeneutics as particularly mediated in the USA through the work of Ricoeur;¹³³ while in Europe the leading anthropologist Mary Douglas, likewise with a broad philosophical back-

¹²⁴ Ricoeur 1971, 1974, 1976, 1981a, 1981b, 1991.

¹²⁵ E.g. Frege 1892, 1962, cf. Wiggins 1999; Russell 1905, 1950; Whitehead 1928; Wittgenstein 1972 / 1953, cf. Baker & Hacker 1980.

¹²⁶ Peirce 1931-1958. Also cf. Almeder 1983, and again with a growing influence on the social sciences, cf. Dewey 1946; Freeman 1983; Sheriff 1989; Schuyt 1986; Neshet 1997.

¹²⁷ Cf. Quine 1960, 1969, 1970, 1974, 1980a, 1980b, 1990a – the latter text containing a crucial discussion of the indeterminacy of reference and of translation, and of ontological relativity – and 1990b – the latter a reflection on the *emic* / *etic* distinction which has proved so seminal to anthropology.

¹²⁸ Cf. Davidson 1984; Grandy 1973; Malpas 1988; McGinn 1977; LePore 1993; I shall come back to this concept in Chapter 15, on the possibility of veridical divination.

¹²⁹ cf. Goodenough 1956; Crick 1976; the leading anthropologist Malinowski also contributed to the seminal collection *Meaning of Meaning* edited by Ogden and Richards 1944 / 1972.

¹³⁰ Weber 1985 / 1919 and 1969; Giddens 1976; Keesing 1987.

¹³¹ Basso & Selby 1976; d'Andrade 1984; Dolgin *et al.* 1977; Spiro & Hallowell 1965.

¹³² Susanne Langer 1942; cf. Cassirer 1923-1929 / 1953-1957; but criticised by Jarvie 1976.

¹³³ Geertz 1973, 1976, 1980 – which remarkably, and regrettably, dismisses the merits of *etic*, as distinct from *emic*, description –, Geertz 1983; Jackson 1989; Fernandez 1982.

ground including Wittgenstein and Heidegger, pioneered *Rules and Meanings* (1973) and *Implicit Meanings* (1984). More directly philosophical orientation to problems of meaning in the context of *Rationality and Relativism*, but with an eye to the requirements of the social sciences, was offered by Hollis & Lukes (1982). An interesting, directly philosophical exploration of a Southern African ethnographic setting was offered by Leeuw 1987; a similar book, but inclined to *belles lettres* rather than philosophy (its title is unmistakably Conradian) is Alverson's *Mind in the Heart of Darkness* (1978), likewise on the Tswana of Southern Africa. The anthropological discipline, like the humanities, also benefited from the emergence of discourse analysis (Chock & Wyman 1986). The general post-structuralist re-discovery of the body as pivotal in social and cultural life (cf. Kimmerle 1989) led to a renewed appreciation¹³⁴ of bodily-inscribed meanings of ritual and every-day life.¹³⁵ Somewhat aloof from these 'Continental' philosophical inspirations, but indebted¹³⁶ to Marxism notably via the Manchester School of anthropology, have been the transactionalist and action-centred approaches which came to abound in the anthropology of the final third of the 20th century CE, and made their own contribution to the anthropological study of meaning (Kapferer 1976; cf. Skorupski 1978). From South Asian Studies as a discipline neighbouring on anthropology, Frits Staal (1989) upset the increasingly meaning-obsessed appercart by stressing the *meaningless* dimensions of ritual – but the equally prominent Sanskritist and comparative mythologist Witzel (1992) came to the rescue with a study of meaningful ritual in the same regional context; cf. Lafontaine 1972. In a framework largely fed by post-structuralist thought current in the second half of the 20th century CE, the immense problems of meaning posed by modern urban mass society found numerous explorations.¹³⁷

Against this background, the anthropological definition of meaning with which we ended the preceding Section seems permissible, but slightly naïve – a common combination in anthropological knowledge production, I am afraid. Thus somewhat equipped with a useful thought one-sided background for the study of meaning, let us return to our main topic in this Chapter, virtuality.

¹³⁴ But already cf. Mauss 1934 / 1973; Blacking 1977.

¹³⁵ Ngubane 1977 / Sibisi 1975; Devisch 1987, 1994, 1995c; Lock & Scheper-Hughes 1987; Pool 1994.

¹³⁶ Like South Asian Post-colonial Theory, cf. Spivak's (1988) Derridean contribution to the interpretation of culture.

¹³⁷ Cf. Featherstone 1990; Hannerz 1992a, 1992b; Ferguson 1999; Meyer & Geschiere 1998; Anderson-Levit 2003; Fardon *et al.* 1998; Nuttall & Michaels 2000; van Binsbergen & van Dijk 2003; and references cited there. Also see the preceding Sections of the present Chapter.

1.5. The problem of meaning in African towns

1.5.1. Back to the virtual village: Even the rural African community is problematic. In Africa, village society still forms the context in which many¹³⁸ present-day urbanites were born, and where some will retire and die. Until a few decades ago, the dichotomy between town and village dominated Africanist anthropology. Today we have to admit that, considering the constant movement of ideas, goods and people between town and village, the dichotomy has lost much of its explanatory value. In terms of social organisation, economic and productive structures, goals and evaluations, town and village have become complementary, even converging options within the social experience of Africans today; their difference has become gradual, and is no longer absolute. However, while of diminishing value in the hands of us analysts, the dichotomy between town and village remains relevant in so far as it informs African actors' conceptualisations of their life-world and social experience. Here the idealised image of the village stands for an imaginary context (no longer to be found in the real villages of today) where production and reproduction are viable and meaningful, pursued by people who – organised along the lines of age and gender divisions, and historic ('traditional') leadership – are turned into an effective community through an un-eroded kinship system, symbolism, ritual and cosmology. Vital in this set-up is that – typically through non-verbal means – ritual manages to construct the bodies of the members of the residential group as charged or inscribed with a shared meaning, a shared identity, and while the body moves across time and space this indelible mark is carried to new contexts yet remains.

Even in the village context the effective construction of community cannot be taken for granted. Central African villages, for instance, have been described (Turner 1968b / 1957; van Velsen 1971; van Binsbergen 1992b, 2014b) as the scene of an uneasy truce between strangers, only temporarily constructed into community – at the expense of kinship rituals which take up an enormous part of available resources and even so barely conceal or negotiate underlying contradictions among the village population. Such rituals of kinship (those attending pregnancy, birth, adolescence, marriage, and death) not only trans-

¹³⁸ How many? That varies considerably between regions and between countries. The post-Independence stagnation of African national economies, the Structural Adjustment Programmes implemented in many African countries, the food insecurity under conditions of civil war and refugeeship, the implementation of rural development programmes – all these conditions have not been able to bring the massive migration to African towns to an end, even if their continued growth must of course be partly accounted for by intra-urban reproduction, so that even in African towns that were colonial creations, many inhabitants today are second to fifth generation urbanites. Typical figures of village-born, first generation urbanites available to me range from an estimated 20% in Lusaka, Zambia (1972) to as much as 60% in Francistown, Botswana (1989).

form biological human individuals into competent social persons with a marked identity founded in the local community (or in the case of death transform such social persons in the face of physical decomposition); such rituals thus construct, within that overall community, specific constituent identities, *e.g.* those of gender and age. They refer to, and to a considerable extent reproduce and perpetuate, the productive and social organisation of the village society. Perhaps the central characteristic of the old (nineteenth-century CE) village order was that the construction of community was still so effective that in the villagers' consciousness their actual residential group self-evidently appeared as the realisation of that ideal.

It is crucial to realise that in the twentieth century CE, even with reference to rural settings, we are not so much dealing with 'real' communities, but with rural folks' increasingly problematic *model* of the village community. Perhaps we could say that the village was already becoming a virtual village. Rural ideological change in Africa during the twentieth century can be summed up (van Binsbergen 1981) as a process of people actively confronting the erosion of that model, its becoming irrelevant and impotent in the face of political and economic realities. Throughout the twentieth century, rural populations in Africa have struggled, through numerous forms of organisational, ideological and productive innovation combining local practices with outside borrowings, to reconstruct a new sense of community in an attempt to revitalise, complement or replace the collapsing village community in its viable nineteenth century form. In fact the entire ideological history of twentieth-century Africa could be written from this perspective. Peasants have been constantly engaged in the construction of new, alternative forms of community on the basis of rather new principles such as derived from political, cultic, productive and consumerist ideas introduced from the wider world. Many of these movements have sought to re-formulate the notion of the viable, intact village community in new terms and with new outside inspiration and outside pressure. Ethnicity, healing cults, prophetic cults, anti-sorcery movements, varieties of imported world religions and local transformations thereof *e.g.* in the form of Independent Churches, struggles for political Independence, involvement in modern national politics including the wave of democratisation after 1989, involvement in a peripheral-capitalist cash economy with new symbols of status and distinction, – these have been some of the strategies by which villagers have sought (often against many odds) to create and bring to life the image of a new world, and a continued sense of meaning and community, when the old village order was felt, or said, to fall apart. And that old village order, and the ethnic cultures under which it was usually subsumed, may in itself have been largely illusory, strategically underpinned by the ideological claims of elders, chiefs, first-generation local intellectuals, colonial administrators and missionaries, open to the cul-

tural bricolage¹³⁹ of invented tradition on the part of these vocal actors (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Vail 1989b).

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

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

1.5.2. Town and country

Globalisation theory has stressed the paradoxical phenomenon that, in the world today, the increasing unification of the globe in political, economic, cultural and communication terms does not lead to increasing uniformity but, on the contrary, goes hand in hand with a proliferation of local differences. It is as if myriad eddies of particularism (which may take the form of ethnic, linguistic and religious identities, consumerist life-styles *etc.*) are the inevitable accompaniment of the swelling stream of globalising universalism. Anthropologists have – in theory, that is – long ceased to define their research object primarily by reference to a more or less demarcated part of the global landscape assumed to be the habitat

¹³⁹ In the original French, *bricolage* is the standard term for do-it-yourself artisanal activities, to which more and more people have resorted in the last half century, due to the high cost of labour and the availability of affordable semi-professional tools and materials. As a technical term of the social and historical sciences, the term took on the meaning of social actors' creative and innovative recombining of the cultural / social material which their social experiences has been offering them, at home but under globalisation conditions increasingly also abroad and through the media. Cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962a; Derrida 1970; Deleuze & Guattari 1972, 1980, where such transposition and re-contextualisation are stressed as roads to the liberty implied in 're-territorialisation' (cf. below, Chapter 10 of the present book, on Guattari); Bastide 1970; Röschenhaler 2004; Werbner 1986 (who in an incisive criticism of Comaroff 1985 argued that resistance and protest are not coinciding roads to liberty; further on the latter discussion, cf. Schoffeleers 1991 and van Binsbergen 1993a).

of a bounded, integrated 'culture' that is supposedly shared by a people, tribe or ethnic group. While the time-honoured technique of participant observation still favours their focusing on a set of people who are more or less tied together by enduring social relations and forms of organisation, such a set needs no longer be localised (for modern technology – not just fax machines and e-mail, but also simple telephones and rural buses – enables people to effectively maintain relationships across great distances: as members of the same ethnic group, as employees of the same multinational corporation, as members of a cult, as traders *etc.*), nor do the individuals which constitute that set (as a statistical conglomerate, or a social network of dyadic ties) necessarily and as a dominant feature of their social experience construct that set as an ideal community with a name, an identity, moral codes and values. Fragmentation, heterogeneity, alienation and cultural and organisational experiment are characteristic of the global condition, not only in North Atlantic urban society but also, for much the same reasons, in the rapidly growing towns of Africa today.



Fig. 1.2. *The problem of meaning in African towns: A rare but instructive sight in urban Africa – an insecure villager at Chachacha Road, Lusaka, Zambia, 1978.*

In essence, the aspect of globalisation which we seek to capture by concentrating on *virtuality*, revolves around issues of African actors' production and sustaining of meaning. The notion of virtuality is hoped to equip us for the situation, rather more common than village anthropology prepared us to believe, that meaning is encountered and manipulated in a context far removed, in time and space, from the concrete social context of production and reproduction where that meaning was originally worked out in a dialectical interplay of articulated modes of production; where, on the contrary, such meaning is no longer local and systemic, but fragmented, ragged, virtual, absurd, maybe even absent. *The study of such forms of meaning is of course doubly problematic because anthropology itself is a globalising project*, and one of the first in Western intellectual history. African towns, with their usually only shallow, recent history, heterogeneous migrant population, and full of social, political and economic structures apparently totally at variance with any village conditions in the surrounding countryside, are *laboratories of meaning*. What can the anthropologist, and particularly the variety of rurally-orientated anthropologist unfashionably favoured in this Chapter, learn here about virtuality?

To what extent has the present-day urban environment in Africa managed to produce and nurture symbols which selectively refer to the state and the world economy, yet at the same time negotiate dilemmas of rural-derived identity and of urban-rural relations? It is here that one can begin to look for the stuff that African urbanism is made of. Is it true to say that these towns have engendered collective representations which are strikingly urban, and which offer partial and tentative yet creative solutions to such typically urban problems as incessant personnel flow, ethnic, class and religious heterogeneity, economic and political powerlessness, and the increasing irrelevance, in the urban situation, of historic, rural-derived forms of social organisation (kinship, marriage, 'traditional' politics and ritual)? J. Clyde Mitchell's *Kalela dance* (1956) – an essay on the ceremonial expression through urban miners' dances, of ethnic classification on the Northern Rhodesian / Zambian Copperbelt in the 1950s after half a century still offers a classic paradigm, stressing how at the city boundaries elements of rural society and culture (such as a rural-based ethnic identity, a minority language, expressive forms of music and dance, specific ways to organise production and reproduction in localised kin groups) may be selectively admitted onto the urban scene, yet undergo such a dramatic transformation of form, organisation and function that their urban manifestations must be understood by reference to the urban situation alone. Or, in Gluckman's (1960: 57) famous words,

'the African townsman is a townsman',¹⁴⁰

in other words, the African townsman is claimed to be, not a displaced villager

¹⁴⁰ For Gluckman's most mature statement on this point, cf. Gluckman 1971.

or tribesman – but on the contrary ‘detrified’ as soon as he leaves his village (Gluckman 1945: 12). These ideas have evidently circulated in African urban studies long before 1960.

Statements of this nature have helped to free our perception of African urbanites from traditionalist and paternalistic projections; for according to the latter they continued to be viewed as temporarily displaced villagers whose true commitment and identity continued to lie with their rural societies of origin. The stress on the urban nature of African urbanites even amounted to a radical political challenge, in a time when the colonial (and South African) economy was largely based on the over-exploitation¹⁴¹ of rural communities through circulatory migration of male workers conveniently defined as bachelors while in town. We can therefore forgive these authors their one-sidedness, but there is no denying that they failed to address the fundamental problems of meaning which the construction of a town-based culture in the (by and large) new cities of Africa has always posed.¹⁴²

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

Before discussing these complexes, it is useful to realise that, as a source of meaning, *the historic rural background culture of urban migrants is not necessarily as fragmented as the multiplicity of ethnic labels and linguistic practices in the town may suggest*. Ethnic groups have a history (Chrétien & Prunier 1989), and while some ethnic groups can be said to be merely recent, colonial creations, underlying their unmistakable differences there is in many cases a common substratum of regional cultural similarities and even identities: continuities such as a patrilineal kinship system, emphasis on cattle, similarities in the marital system, the cult of the land and of the ancestors, patterns of divination and of sacrifice, shared ideas about causation including witchcraft beliefs, converging ideas about conflict resolution and morality. The result is that even urban migrants with a different ethnic, linguistic and geographical background

¹⁴¹ Meillassoux 1975; cf. Gerold-Scheepers & van Binsbergen 1978; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985.

¹⁴² Nor should we over-generalise. Mitchell’s seminal *Kalela dance* should be contrasted with the work of Philip and Ilona Mayer, which was rather more subtle, and much better informed, on rural cultural material as introduced into the towns of Southern Africa; cf. Mayer 1971, Mayer 1980; the latter also includes Patrick McAllister’s illuminating essay on ‘the ritual interpretation of labour migration’ – labour migration being, of course, the main format in which urban-rural relations have presented themselves in South Central and Southern Africa up to the first decades of Independence / majority rule; Mayer & Mayer 1974.

may yet find that they possess a cultural *lingua franca* that allows them to share such historic meanings as have not been mediated through the state and capitalism. Sometimes specific routinised modes of inter-ethnic discourse (such as *joking relations*) explicitly mediate this joint substratum. Traditional cults and Independent Christian Churches in town, which tend to be trans-ethnic, derive much of their appeal from the way in which they articulate this historic substratum and thus recapture meanings which no longer can be communicated with through migrants' direct identification with any specific historic rural culture. Moreover, partly on the basis of these rural continuities, urban migrants creatively develop a new common idiom not only for language communication, but also for the patterning of their everyday relationships, their notions of propriety and neighbourliness, the interpretation and settlement of their conflicts, and the evaluation of their statuses.

After this qualification, let us sum up the principal cosmopolitan complexes informing African urban meaning:

- *The post-colonial state*: a principal actor in the struggle for control of the urban space; a major agent of social control through its law-and-order institutions (the judiciary, police, immigration department); a major mediator of 'cosmopolitan' meaning through the bureaucratically organised services it offers in such fields as education, cosmopolitan medicine, housing, the restructuration of kinship forms through statutory marriage *etc.*; a major context for the creation of new, politically instrumental meaning in the process of nation-building and elite legitimation; and through its constitutional premises the object (and often hub) of modern political organisations.
- A variety of manifestations of the *capitalist mode of production*, largely structuring the urbanites' economic participation and hence their experience of time, space, causation, personhood and social relations; involving them in relations of dependence and exploitation whose ideological expression we have learned to interpret in terms of alienation (the destruction of historic meaning); but also, in the process, leading on to modern organisational forms (*e.g.* trade unions) meant to counter the powerlessness generated in that process; and finally producing both the manufactured products on which mass consumption as a world-wide economic and cultural expression – in other words, as another, immensely potent form of 'cosmopolitan' meaning – depends, as well as the financial *means* to participate in mass consumption.
- *World religions*, which pursue organisational forms and ideological orientations rather reminiscent of the post-colonial state and the capitalist mode of production, yet tending to maintain, in time, space and ideological content, sufficient distance from the latter two complexes to have their own appeal on the urban population, offering formal socio-ritual contexts in which imported cosmopolitan symbols can be articulated and shared between ur-

banites, and in which – more than in the former two complexes – rural-based historic symbols can be mediated, particularly through African Independent Churches.

- *Cosmopolitan consumer culture*, ranging from fast food shops to hire-purchase furniture stores displaying the whole material dream of a prospective middle-class life-style, and from video outlets and record shops to the retail shops of the international ready-made garment industry, and all the other material objects by which one can encode distinctions in or around one's body and its senses, and create identity not by seclusive group-wise self-organisation but by individual communication with globally mediated manufactured symbols.

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

The ways in which African urbanites, in their interactions and conceptualisations, construct, keep apart, and merge as the case may be, cosmopolitan and rural idioms, are ill understood for several reasons. Those who, as social scientists, are supposed to study these patterns of interaction are, in their personal and professional lives, themselves partisans of cosmopolitan repertoires and are likely to be identified as such by the other actors on the urban scene. Much of the actors' juggling of repertoires is evasive and combines the assumption of rigid subordination with the practice of creative challenge and tacit symbolic resistance in private spheres of urban life where few representatives of the cosmopolitan repertoires have access. Hence my repeated claim that in modern, especially 'pre-post-apartheid', Southern African socio-cultural life, traditional culture and historic religion have gone 'underground'. And whereas anthropology has developed great expertise in the handling of meaning in one spatio-temporal context (e.g. rural African societies) whose wholeness and integration it has tended to exaggerate, the development of a sensitive approach to fragmented and incoherent multiplicity of repertoires of meaning, each assaulted and rendered more or less meaningless by the presence of the other, had to wait till the advent of Post-modernism as an attempt to revolutionise, or to explode, anthropology.¹⁴³ Our classic predecessors in African urban studies worked on the assumption that the African urban situation was very highly structured – by what they called the 'co-

¹⁴³ Cf. Geuijen 1992; Kapferer 1988; Nencel & Pels 1991; Pels & Salemink 1994; Tyler 1987; and references cited there. Equally relevant has been the work of Hannerz, see below.

lonial-industrial complex' imposing rigid segregation and class interests, by voluntary associations, by networks.¹⁴⁴ In the present-day world, such structure is becoming more and more problematic, and the town, especially the African town, appears as the post-modern social space par excellence. My greatest analytical problem here is that as a social space the town lacks the coherent integrated structure which could produce, like the village, a systematic (albeit internally segmented and contradictory) repertoire of meaning ready for monographic processing; but this may not merely be one researcher's analytical problem – it appears to sum up the essence of what the urban experience in Africa today is about, in the lives of a great many urbanites.

Post-modernism is not the only, and deliberately unsystematic, analytical approach to multiplicity of meaning within a social formation consisting of fundamentally different and mutually irreducible sub-formations. As a paradigm that preceded Post-modernism by a decade in the circulation of intellectual fashions, the neo-Marxist notion of articulation of modes of production is in principle capable of handling such a situation.¹⁴⁵ However, the emphasis, in that approach, on enduring structure and a specific internal logic for each constituent mode of production renders it difficult to accommodate the extreme fragmentation and contradiction of meaning typical of the urban situation. The various cosmopolitan and local historic repertoires of meaning as discussed here cannot convincingly be subsumed under the heading of a limited number of articulated modes of production. Yet while deriving inspiration from the post-modern position, my argument in the present Chapter is a plea for rather greater insistence on structure, power and material conditions than would suit the convinced post-modernist.

The work of Ulf Hannerz (1980, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1992a, 1992b) is instructive for the kind of processes of cultural production, variation and control one would stress when looking at African towns (or towns anywhere else in the modern world, for that matter) from the perspective of the modern world as a unifying, globalising whole. However, it is significant that his work, far from problematising the concept of meaning as such, takes meaning rather for granted and concentrates on the social circulation of meaning, in other words its management of meaning.¹⁴⁶ Hannerz's position here is far from exceptional in anthropology, where we theorise much less about meaning than would be suggested by the large number of anthropological publications with 'meaning', 'significance', 'interpretation' and 'explanation' in their titles. And I am not doing much better here myself. I did offer, above, a homespun definition of ethnographic meaning, but the subsequent theoretical discussion of meaning in philosophy and anthropology shows the severe limitations of my approach to meaning in the present

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Mitchell 1956, 1969; Epstein 1958, 1967.

¹⁴⁵ E.g. van Binsbergen 1981b; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985.

¹⁴⁶ Hannerz 1992a: 17, 273; taking his cue from: Cohen & Comaroff 1976.

Chapter's argument – which however I cannot substantially alter at this stage.

Also for Hannerz the African townsman is truly a townsman, and even the analyst seems to have entirely forgotten that 'many' of these urbanites, even today, have been born outside town under conditions of rural, localised meaning such as it is continued to be produced today, and that this circumstance is likely to be somehow reflected in their urban patterns of signification. In certain urban situations rural models of interaction and co-residence tend to be more prominent than in others. We need to remind ourselves of the fact that urban does not necessarily mean global. For instance, as a fresh urban immigrant one can take refuge among former fellow-villagers, in an urban setting. This was, for instance, driven home to me in our study of pattern of co-residence in an urban squatment in Francistown, Botswana¹⁴⁷ where urban immigrants from scores of different villages in the wide surroundings would tend to cluster into co-residence – clearly offering refuge and assistance on the basis of perceived and affirmed rural identities, and of social relationships continuing across the rural-urban geographical gap; cf. Fig. 1.4.

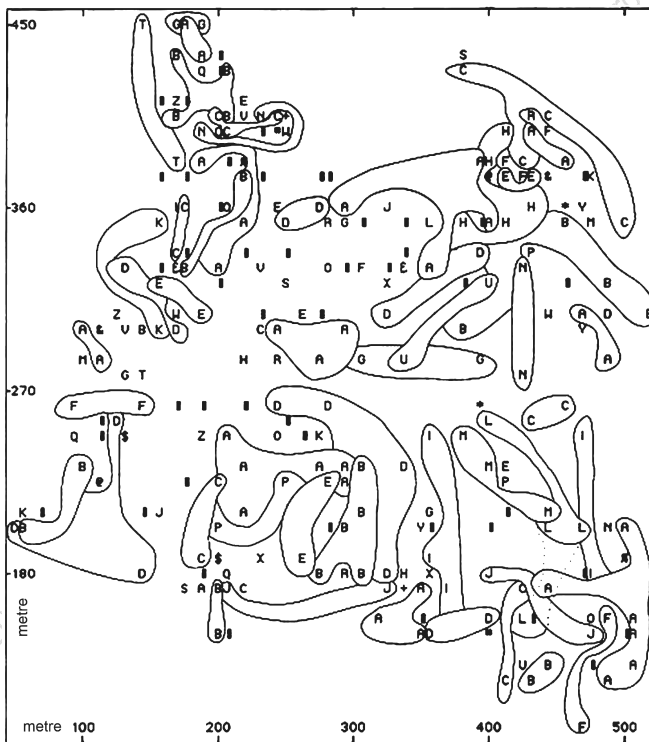


Fig. 1.3. Overview of the PWD squatment, Francistown, Botswana, 1998-1999; the highest hilltop in the background is Nyangab[g]we ('Rock Hill'), from which Francistown derives its, identical, local name. The cylindrical structure halfway the lower top is a water reservoir belonging to the municipal Public Works Department (PWD), where some of the original inhabitants of this squatment were employed.

The vast evidence on urban immigration in Africa suggests however that the

¹⁴⁷ 1988-1989; van Binsbergen 1993; van Binsbergen with Krijnen 1989; cf. Krijnen 1991.

rural-orientated refuge in a denial of globalisation tends to be partial and largely illusory, in other words towns precisely in their display of apparently rural-derived elements tend to high levels of virtuality / discontinuity / transformation. Even so it remains important to look at meaning in African towns not only from a global perspective but also from the perspective of the home villages of many of the urbanites or their parents and grandparents. With these theoretical considerations in mind, let us now turn to our four case studies, in a bid to add further empirical detail and relevance to the concept of virtuality. Our first case study deals with an urban situation, and should help us to lend empirical and comparative insight in the applicability of the virtuality concept.



each capital letter indicates a specific village home; black rectangle represent dwellings where the village home has not been ascertained; a full key to these village homes is given in: van Binsbergen 1993d.

Fig. 1.4. Clustering of residents according to their village homes, PWD squatterment, Francistown, Botswana, 1988-1989.

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

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

When¹⁴⁸ central reproductive institutions of the old village order, including rituals of kinship, are already under great pressure from new and external alternatives in the rural environment, one would hardly expect them to survive in urban contexts. For in town people's life is obviously structured, economically and in terms of social organisation (see the four cosmopolitan complexes outlined above), in ways which would render hopelessly obsolete all symbolic and ritual reference to rural-based cults reproducing the old village order. Who would expect ancestral cults to be practiced in urban settings in modern Africa? What theory of change and continuity would predict the continued, even increasing practice of ecstatic possession ritual in urban residential areas, often in the trappings of new, formally organised cults posing as Christian churches or Islamic brotherhoods, but often also without such emulation of world religions? Why do people pursue apparently rural forms when socially, politically and economically their lives as urbanites are effectively divorced from the village? *The point is, however, that rural symbolic forms are prominent on the African urban scene; as such they represent a conspicuous element of virtuality, since urban life is no longer informed by the patterns of production and reproduction that corresponded with these rural symbols in the first place.*

Stressing the complementarity between a local community's social, political and economic organisation and the attending religious forms, the Durkheimian heritage¹⁴⁹ in the social science approach to religion, however dominant, provided no ready answers when applied to the study of historic ('traditional') urban ritual, at least in Africa.¹⁵⁰ For how can there be such continuity when African urbanites stage a rural ritual in the very different urban context? What

¹⁴⁸ For specific details on this Section, see above, *Provenances*. Of the vast literature on puberty initiation in South Central and Southern Africa, I mention moreover: Creten 1996; Corbeil 1982; de Boeck 1991, 1992; Gluckman 1949; Hoch 1968; Jules-Rosette 1979-80; Maxwell 1983: 52-70; Mayer 1971; Mayer & Mayer 1974; Richards 1982 (which includes a 'regional bibliography' on girls' initiation in South Central Africa); Turner 1964, 1967b; van Binsbergen 1987, 1992b, 1993b; White 1953.

¹⁴⁹ See the various discussions of Durkheim throughout the present book, as listed in the Index of Authors.

¹⁵⁰ This embarrassment created by the dominant paradigm is probably the main reason why the study of African historic urban ritual is much less developed than the empirical incidence of such ritual would justify. Such studies as exist have tended to underplay the historic, rural dimension in favour of the modern dimension (Mitchell 1956; Ranger 1975b), or have drawn from other founts of inspiration than the dominant Durkheimian paradigm (Janzen 1992; van Binsbergen 1981).

would be the referent of the symbols circulating in such ritual? The relative paucity of studies on this point stands in amazing contrast with the prevalence and ubiquity of the actual practice on the ground. It is as if the absence of an adequate interpretative framework has caused anthropologists to close their eyes for the ethnographic facts staring them in the face. At the same time they have produced in abundance studies of forms of urban ritual in the context of world religions (especially studies on urban Independent and mainstream Christian churches), which of course do 'feel right' in an urban setting, where (far more directly than in the remote countryside) globalisation made its impact on the African continent.



Fig. 1.5. Menarche in an African town. Seated on a rush mat next to the white-scarved woman who will be her mentrix, a Nsenga girl (middle left) who only minutes before was found to have her first menstruation, is respectfully and joyfully saluted by her mother (kneeling, right), elder sister and a woman neighbour (standing), while the latter's husband holds ready an axe and a pumpkin which are to be held over the girl's head in evocation of agricultural tasks she, as an urbanite, may never discharge. Tragically, the girl died within a year after this event. Chelston suburb, Lusaka, Zambia, 1978.

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

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

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

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

roles to villagers and urbanites in that context (the townsmen would often feature as ethnic brokers between the rural community and the outside world at the regional and national level), and effectively re-defines the old localised and homogeneous village community into a de-localised ethnic field spanning both rural and urban structures, confronting ethnic strangers and organising those of the same ethnic identity for new tasks outside the village, in opposition to urban ethnic rivals, the urban economy and the central state. In this ethnic context, the urban staging of 'traditional' rural ritual would be explained as the self-evident display of ethnically distinctive symbolic production. But again, any bricolage of old and new, local and global forms of symbolic production might serve the same purpose.

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

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

And finally, these approaches ignore such alternative and rival modes of creating meaning and community, precisely in a context of heterogeneity and choice which is so typical for towns wherever in the modern world. If urbanites stage rural kinship rituals in town it is not because they have no choice. They could tap any of the four complexes of cosmopolitan meaning outlined above, do as Hannerz and the many authors he cites suggest, oblige Gluckman, and completely forget about rural forms. And even if they do insist on selectively adhering to rural forms in the urban context, further questions can be asked. Do they retain firm boundaries *vis-à-vis* each other and *vis-à-vis* the rural-centred model, or is there rather a mutual interpenetration and blending? What explains that these globalising alternatives leave ample room for what would appear to be an obsolete, rural form, the puberty rite? How do these symbolic and ideological dimensions relate to material conditions, and to power and authority: do they reflect or deny material structures of deprivation and domination; do they underpin such power as is based on privileged position in the political economy of town and state, or do they, on the contrary, empower those that otherwise would remain underprivileged; to what strategies do they give rise in the inequalities of age and gender, which are symbolically enacted in the village model of community and in the associated kinship rituals, but which also, al-

beit in rather different forms, structure urban social life?

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

While the centrally-located farmer's town of Lusaka took over, as territorial capital, from the town of Livingstone in the extreme South of the country, a series of new towns was created in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) at the eastern end of the 'Line of Rail' as from the late 1920s, in order to accommodate the massive influx of labourers in the copper mining industry. As 'the Copperbelt', this is the most highly urbanised part of the country, and the site of famous and seminal studies in urban ethnicity, politics and religion. While imposed on a rural area where ethnicity was primarily constructed in terms of the Lamba identity, the Copperbelt attracted migrants from all over South Central Africa but particularly from Northern Zambia; the Bemba identity (in itself undergoing considerable transformation and expansion in the process) became dominant in these towns, and the 'town Bemba' dialect became their *lingua franca* (Kashoki 1972, 1975).

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

Throughout South Central Africa, female puberty ritual is one of the dominant kinship rituals (even more so than the male counterpart); its remarkably similar forms have been described in detail in many rural ethnographic contexts from the Democratic Republic Congo to Northern Transvaal.¹⁵¹ For almost a century, female puberty ritual was banned as pagan and sinful in Roman Catholic circles in Zambia. However, already during my research on urban churches in Zambia's capital Lusaka in the early 1970s I found women's lay groups within the formal organisation of mainstream churches to experiment with Christian alternatives to female puberty training. Therefore I was not surprised to learn that by the late 1980s, these experiments had grown into accepted practice. Nor is the phenomenon strictly confined to urban churches; for instance in the area of my main Zambian research, in Kaoma district in the Western part of the country, a limited number of women now claim to have been 'matured'¹⁵² in church' rather than in a family-controlled rural or urban kinship ritual.

¹⁵¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 2003b: 100 n 1 for the relevant literature, and in fact, the entire Chapter 3 of that book for my own grappling with female puberty rites among the Nkoya people.

¹⁵² Which is the standard expression for puberty initiation in Zambian English.

The situation in the Zambian urban church congregations, as brought out by Thera Rasing's research (1995, *cf.* 2001), is of inspiring complexity. On the one hand there is a proliferation of lay groups, each with their own uniforms and paraphernalia, formal authority structure within the overall church hierarchy, routine of meetings and prayers, and specialised topics of attention: caring for the sick, the battle against alcoholism, *etc.* Already in these groups the organisational form and routine, and the social embeddedness this offers to the socially uprooted members, would appear to be an attempt at the construction of social locality. The latter might be of greater interpretative relevance than the specific contents of the religious ideas and practices circulating there; the result is, to use this phrase once more, 'a place to feel at home' – but at the same time a place to engage in formal organisation. At first sight such a voluntary organisational form would appear to be an aim and a source of satisfaction and meaning in itself; that is how, for instance, I looked at the Independent Churches which I first studied in Lusaka in the early 1970s, when my theoretical baggage was still inadequate to appreciate them beyond the idea that they were contexts to learn about bureaucracy and modernity. However, I am now beginning to realise that it is such formal organisations which create the bedding, and the boundaries, within which the uncontrolled flow of goods, images and ideas as conveyed by globalisation, can be turned into localised identity.

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

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

appear to challenge the globalising universalism of this world religion, and which for close to a century has been condemned for doing just that.



Fig. 1.6. Do the rural cosmology and ritual practice constitute the principal referents of urban puberty rites? Coming-out dance of a girl (standing, left, with head scarf), escorted by her under-age second (standing, right, with bead scapular), under the encouraging eyes of her mentrix (centre, with beads in her hair), Mukunkike village, Kaoma, Zambia, 1978.

The crucial interpretative problem here lies in its *virtuality*: in the fact that the Copperbelt women staging these rituals, as well as their adolescent initiands, do not in the least belong, nor consciously aspire to belong, to the ideal village world which is expounded in the ritual. These rituals belong to a realm of *virtuality*, very far removed from the Durkheimian premise of a coincidence between religious form and local group. Here we have to assess the various orders of reality, dream, ideal, fantasy and imagery that informs a modern African urban population in the construction of their life-world. For while the kinship ritual emphasises reproductive roles within marriage, agricultural and domestic productive roles for women, and their respect for authority positions within the rural kinship structure as defined by gender and age, these urban women de-

part very far from the model of rural womanhood upheld in the initiation they stage in town, where it is formally taught through songs, through the supervising elders' pantomimes, wall pictures specifically drawn for the purpose, and especially by reference to clay models of human beings, their body parts, and man-made artefacts. Admittedly, many of these women still cherish their urban garden plots, but even if these are not raided by thieves around harvest time, their produce falls far short in feeding the owners and their families through the annual cycle. These women have few effective ties any more with a distant village – and those that exist are mainly revived in the case of funerals. In their sexual and reproductive behaviour they operate largely outside the constraints stipulated by the kinship ritual and the associated formal training; as female heads of households they are often without effective and enduring ties with a male partner; and not even all do subscribe to the Bemba ethnic identity.

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

It is not the purpose of this Section to answer these important questions; Ras-ing's research does just that. It is time for us to proceed to our second example of virtuality, which again explores the relevance of rural-derived models in African urban contexts.

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

1.7.1. Kinshasa, Democratic Republic Congo: 'The aftermath of unwhitening'

My second case study takes us to Kinshasa, the turbulent capital of the Democratic Republic Congo. In a masterly paper which has created much debate, my dear friend René Devisch – who has established himself internationally as one of the major anthropologists working on the Democratic Republic Congo, and one of the few who still manage to do field-work there – describes in detail the rise and fall of sensualism and 'unwhitening' in post-colonial Kinshasa, including the popular orgies of Luddite¹⁵³ material destruction in the early 1990s and their aftermath. At the end of his account he claims that a retreat towards what he calls 'villagisation' constitutes the major response among inhabitants in the mid-1990s.¹⁵⁴ Devisch insists on applying the cosmology of the prototypical Zaïrean village (which to him is in the first place a Yaka village) to the new urban orientation. For the first time, he asserts, ethics have been introduced into an urban space which in preceding decades was seen, by its inhabitants, as a mere place of individual 'hunting' (like the rural forest), without ethics, where the bars of the 1970s have been transformed into maternities and churches of today, and where thieves can no longer trespass into the suburbs which are now publicly regarded as a secluded, almost sacred space set apart for mothers and their children.

1.7.2. The oneiric village and urban cultural consensus

Attractive and revealing as this picture is, the suggested process of villagisation refers not to a real village but to a dream village. It seems yet another version of a process long ago recognised by students of symbolic transformations in twentieth-century CE Africa and extensively referred to above: the attempt to cope with ongoing social, political and economic change by formulating new blueprints for the ideal society, which invariably was to emulate the ideals of the village, in terms of kinship support, intimacy, cosmologically underpinned order, absence of violence, of incest, and of sorcery. Essential in this dream is that it only seeks to emulate, not a historical village itself, but a loose selection of traits referring to the village yet transformed so as to match a non-village environment engaged in the capitalist mode of production and consumption. Against this background the notion of *villagisation*, when applied – by predominantly a rural researcher – to one of the largest cities in Africa, is puzzling.

¹⁵³ The term used for workers' mass destruction of newly-invented machinery in the early phases of the Industrial Revolution in England.

¹⁵⁴ Devisch 1995a; cf. Caubergs & Devisch 1995; Devisch 1996.

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

Is it Devisch himself as an analyst, who is tempted to conceptualise modern Kinshasa in terms of holistic, systemic locality (as a classic anthropologist looking at the rural Yaka might have been tempted to do) – or does he merely bring out, as a faithful ethnographer, the implicit '*emic*' notions such as exist among the people he writes about? He does not make it very easy for us to answer this important question, for he chooses not to use the common theoretical and methodological tools which the social sciences have developed for the analysis of urban mass society. To the extent to which the city can never be a small-scale closely-knit social community, the tacit assumption of consensus, of a generally shared urban culture of Kinshasa, may presuppose far more locally-anchored, shared meaning in the urban situation than that situation warrants. The underlying assumption of convergence and consensus, without which it would not make sense to try and sketch 'the' modern culture of Kinshasa in terms of villagisation, needs to be argued in detail. How is Devisch going to convince us that the views of the present-day urban situation as held by, say, urban formal-sector workers let alone administrators and politicians, converge with those held by squatters, of workers in the informal sector, *etc.*? In order to identify the plane at which his aggregate urban culture and its claimed tendency towards villagisation could exist at all, we need a more explicit discussion of the field-work methods used. Now the *oneiric* (dream-like) view which Devisch presents as representative for Kinshasans' experience and outlook today, – as a collective dream – is so aggregate and remains so much without identified social locus (in terms of class, gender, and other prime structural characteristics

of individual urbanites) within the complex urban scene, that we cannot be sure of the empirical basis of the ethnographer's construct. Whose dream or dreams are we talking about? And if it is really 'the dream' of the majority of Kinshasans today (rather than the ethnographer's dream), or at least of an identifiable segment of the urban population, what method can show us that they are all dreaming the same dream, and what theoretical explanation can we give of the social process which brought about such consensus?

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

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

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

If Devisch's villagisation, far from being the mere holistic projections of a post-classic rural ethnographer, are an unmistakable manifestation of widespread virtuality in the African urban situation, then this prompts a comparison between Kinshasa and other major African cities. Such a comparison is likely to show that Kinshasa, despite the special and tragic post-colonial experience of Zaïre / the Democratic Republic Congo, is not entirely unique, not even in the sort of ethical reconstruction which Devisch has witnessed there. Urban Zam-

bia under Kaunda, especially in the 1960 and 1970, had very much the same emphasis on sensualism and dandyism as described by Devisch for Kinshasa; and in fact 'Congo' represented a dominant cultural model at the time, eagerly emulated throughout Africa, especially in music, dance, and dress.

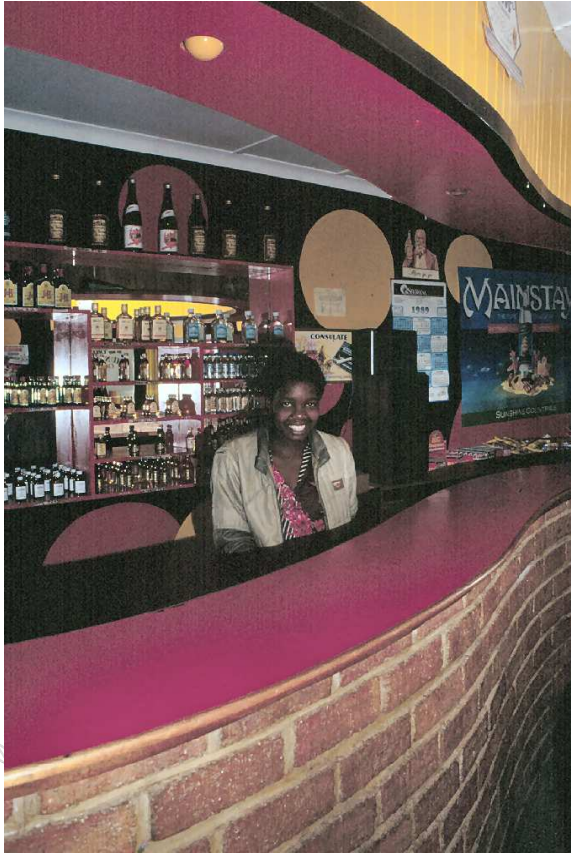


Fig. 1.7. Village shelters are giving way to urban bars as foci of the male social process. A bar in the Monarch residential area, Francistown, Botswana, 1989.

In the course of the 1980s and 1990s I have had occasion to sample, during a number of short research trips, the changes which have occurred in Lusaka as compared to the time when I did extensive anthropological field-work there, in 1972-74. Here the same shift from emphatic display of sexual prowess as a sign

of power and prestige, to an almost puritanical public emphasis on sexual propriety and on church affiliation. And this is not just a façade of paying lip-service to modern norms and ideals: actual behaviour has also changed, and promiscuity as well as sexual joking are far less the norm now than they were in the early 1970s.

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

F. SPONTANEOUS ORDER AND INSTANT JUSTICE AROUND A LUSAKA BUS STATION, ZAMBIA. An impressive example is the situation around Kamwala bus station, Lusaka's main bus terminal. The nature of the Zambian transport system has been such that (not unlike many other such places in the South) hundreds of people often have to spend the night here, or several nights, in the open, waiting for connecting transport. For decades, especially after Independence (1964), the bus station was a place of violence, theft, rape and general insecurity. In the early 1990s, the young men trying to squeeze out a living by showing people to their seats and carrying their luggage (monopolising the right to seats and to luggage services in the process) organised into vigilante groups, which much to the satisfaction, and with the grateful support, of the public, create an authoritarian but effective order around the bus station, not only handling (in a fair and efficient way) the allocation of seats, but also giving chase to, and physically punishing (to the point of severe injury, sometimes death), all evil-doers on the station's premises, including luggage thieves, people trying to travel without a valid ticket *etc.* But while now their action is focused, organised and publicly sanctioned, it also carries on the tradition which has existed for decades in urban Zambia, that of 'instant justice', where especially street thieves have been known to risk their lives since every year several of them were mobbed to death in every Zambian town.

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

In this Section's first case study, above, we have discussed girl's puberty rites in Zambian towns. Such ceremonies, whose basic outlines were conceived in terms of local historic cultures, have constituted a feature of Zambian towns ever since these towns were created as from the beginning of the 20th century CE. Habitually, their reference was explicitly to the village, where (to summarise the urban actors' views in anthropological terms) the kinship and conjugal structures and roles, the pattern of production and reproduction, the symbolism and cosmology, and the expertise about all this, were supposed to be preserved to a greater extent than in town, so that often some participation by actual villagers had to be an aspect of the urban rites. Research by Thera Ra-

sing, however, suggests that this division of labour has become reversed. Not only is there an increase in urban female puberty rites, even in the context of established churches (yet remarkably faithful to historic models without much Christian input), but the urban scene is now totally independent from rural homes, which are hardly visited any more, and where (at least in the Northern Zambian rural areas) such rites are far less observed today. The cosmology and gender identity conveyed through the rites are now confidently produced in town. They have become an urban phenomenon, aspects of the reconstruction of a new Zambian cultural identity which takes aboard selectively transformed historical culture, but whose locus is urban far more than rural.

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

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

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

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

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

1.8.1. Introduction

For my third case study, I contrast two excellent papers by my long-standing

colleagues and friends Peter Geschiere and Matthew Schoffeleers. Geschiere's paper offers a convincing example of virtuality in the context of globalisation, with special application to modern African religion. Matthew Schoffeleers' paper provides the perspective from which I can focus on Geschiere's.¹⁵⁵

Geschiere's paper is only the introductory chapter of a beautiful and thoughtful book (Geschiere c.s. 1995; also cf. Geschiere 1996a, 1996b, 2013), which has been widely acclaimed in its French version and whose English version, has played a major role in the current revival of the study of occult forces in a context of globalisation. I have read the book in the form of a personal copy donated to me as, in the author's own dedication,

'le grand sorcier de l'anthropologie hollandaise',¹⁵⁶

so even if Geschiere wittily states that

'On ne se remercie pas dans le monde de la sorcellerie' (Geschiere c.s. 1995: 5),

and even if there are indications that he is right, there are obvious limitations to the kind of comment I can present here. At the same time, the most appropriate way to show appreciation for a scholar's work is to critically review his work in detail – the present volume is a continuous application of that principle. But let me stress from the outset that my focus here is not so much on Geschiere's work as such but on the way it illustrates problems of virtuality.

1.8.2. A healing movement in Malawi

Schoffeleers, on his part, deals with a recent and short-lived healing cult in Malawi, around the healer Billy Goodson Chisupe.¹⁵⁷ During a few months in 1995 – grabbing an opportunity which fell away with the aged protagonist's death – tens of thousands of people flocked to his village home in order to obtain the cure for the new and devastating AIDS affliction – in a dream the cure had been shown to him – an ordinary villager until then – only a few months earlier.

In terms of the story of the prophet's calling, and the massive pilgrimage to his

¹⁵⁵ Geschiere, 1996a, being the provisional English version of the introductory chapter of: Geschiere c.s. 1995; Schoffeleers 1996.

¹⁵⁶ A reference, not, I hope, to the USA racist terrorist organisation Klukluxklan (whose leader has a similar title), but to my initiation as a spirit medium in the early 1990s and my subsequent practice as a traditional healer in Botswana, cf. van Binsbergen 1991a; revised version 2003b: ch. 5; also cf. van Dijk & Pels 1996. But much earlier, in his Wiles lectures delivered before the University of Belfast, 1978, my inspiring senior colleague and friend Terence Ranger found occasion to embellish his discussion of my analysis of religion including sorcery in Western Zambia with (correct) details as to how during field-work the local population considered me a witch. Needless to say that these lectures were never published. Cf. van Binsbergen 1981b; Ranger was referring to my earlier, preliminary statements, e.g. van Binsbergen 1976b, 1979a.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Probst 1996. I am grateful to my colleague Rijk van Dijk for an extensive comment on this Section.

rural dwelling, the cult replays a scenario that is familiar to students of popular religion in South Central Africa in the twentieth century CE, from the prophet Mupumani who appeared in the midst of drought and effective colonial penetration in the 1910s, to the prophetess Lenshina in the 1950s and 1960s (van Binsbergen 1981). In the most admirable and convincing way, Schoffeleers situates the shallow history of the cult both within the time-honoured cosmology of the Malawi countryside of which he has become the principal living ethnographer (Schoffeleers 1979, 1992, 2008); and within the national political and social developments in Malawi during the 1980s and early 1990s. Much like other religious movements in South Central Africa, Chisupe's cult is interpreted, beyond its therapeutic ineffectiveness against AIDS, as an attempt to revitalise the society and the country.

Of course Schoffeleers realises that the central concept of *mcape* which – in deviation from the healer's own choice of words – has been imposed, by the Malawian public and the media, to denote the reddish herbal solution dispensed by the healer, while retaining its basic meaning of 'ablution', in the colonial history of Malawi and other parts of South Central Africa has acquired a more specific reference: to the young men, often returning migrants, who would come to the villages forcing people to surrender their witchcraft materials and to be cleansed.¹⁵⁸

However, in the context of Chisupe's cult, references to witchcraft have been so minimal that Schoffeleers although familiar with the literature on the subject, sees no reason to refer to them.

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

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

Employing standard anthropological instruments such as cultural relativism and the distinction between emic (actors') models and etic (analytical) models,¹⁵⁹ we may be tempted to distinguish at least four different contexts where terms designating such 'occult forces' are coined:

- the village and the local language prevailing there,
- the popular culture of the town with its oscillation between local Af-

¹⁵⁸ Redmayne 1970; Ranger 1972; van Dijk 1992; and extensive references cited there.

¹⁵⁹ This distinction is central to classic, i.e. pre-post-modern, anthropology; for definitions, elaboration and references, cf. Headland *et al.* 1990; van Binsbergen 2003b: 22 *f.*

- rican languages, and an international language,
- the national elite and its preferred international language, or
 - the domain of international scholarship.

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

In Geschiere's argument witchcraft is the central issue, and he sees no option but to confirm the image well-known from the literature written by missionaries and colonial administrators of a much earlier vintage:¹⁶⁰ *an Africa which is truly the very abode of witchcraft.*¹⁶¹ But, contrary to the expectations of these early European observers and actors on the African scene, he proceeds to demonstrate that witchcraft has not disappeared under the onslaught of modernity, but has installed itself within the very heart of modernity: it appears to have come the dominant discourse concerning power in the post-colonial state, and concerning the acquisition and use of modern consumer goods.

1.8.4. The absence of witchcraft in Chisupe's movement

In Schoffeleers' argument, by contrast, the witchcraft element is absent, as we have said,¹⁶² and I am inclined to think that this is a valid rendering of the actual situation. Not so much because Schoffeleers is the Malawi specialist (his data in this case are not of standard quality, deriving from newspaper clippings, personal correspondence and unedited video recordings taken by an anthropo-

¹⁶⁰ A few examples out of many: Melland 1967; Mackenzie 1925.

¹⁶¹ Interestingly, witchcraft and othering have often gone together in North Atlantic history: in Graeco-Roman Antiquity, it was relative others such as Thracians and Thessalians that were considered witches *par excellence*, whereas both for the Israelite tradition (*e.g.* around Moses and *Exodus*) and for the Graeco-Roman one, Egypt was the very heartland of sorcery (Neubauer 1965 / 1868: 406; Borghouts 1995; Murray 1962 / 1921 relegates Ancient European occult practices to Ancient Egypt, but while there was some general support for this thesis – Bernal 1987; Quispel 1992 –, it was adamantly contested by Ginzburg 1992 / 1989. In Early Modern times in the North Atlantic, women as the proverbial others in a male-dominated society were the principal targets of witchcraft accusations (Trevor-Roper 1969; Roper 1994).

¹⁶² In his oral presentation at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Sociology of Development, Free University, Amsterdam, 12 April 1996, Schoffeleers admitted that in Malawi the term *mcupe* carries general connotations of witchcraft; and regardless of the issue whether witchcraft might have been a more prominent aspect of the Chisupe movement than his argument suggests (apparently it was not), he also pointed out that given the primary audience he has in mind for his paper (notably, producers and consumers of African Theology) he could not afford to enter into a technical anthropological discussion of witchcraft if he did not want to leave that audience in the cold.

logical colleague, – he has not even been on the spot); not even because of corroborating evidence including personal communications from Probst, van Dijk and other local ethnographers; but because the extensive research on religious transformations in South Central Africa in the course of the last few centuries – the massive research output over the past three decades, which has owed so much to Terence Ranger¹⁶³ – certainly has revealed the existence of a limited number of options besides witchcraft.



Fig. 1.8. Although the global economy is omnipresent (notice the enamel basin, petrol drums, plastic bucket, manufactured textiles, next to locally grown calabash containers), viable agricultural production, a selection of which is shown in the picture, continues to provide relevance to the ancient rural cosmology; Nkeyema, Kaoma District, Zambia, 1978.

Witchcraft was the main issue in some religious expressions which, having become fashionable, swept as cults across the region – but not in all. Ironically, witchcraft eradication movements do not constitute the crucial limiting case their name would suggest, for the active confrontation of the witchcraft in

¹⁶³ Cf. Ranger 1967, 1968a, 1968b, 1968c, 1970, 1975a, 1975b, 1978; Ranger & Kimambo 1972; Ranger & Weller 1975.

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

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

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

For Schoffeleers this is a *regionally embedded context*: without saying so explicitly, the argument moves back and forth between on the one hand, post-colonial Malawi, whose socio-cultural and political outlines we need to know in order to understand the story - and on the other hand some generalised Malawian historic village environment, which constitutes the setting for cosmological notions about trees and their healing power, and for the typical biography (including temporary death, a visit to the underworld or heaven, and rebirth on earth) of the prophet and the healer (van Binsbergen 1981: 195, 239), – in other words, the village is the very place where ancestors dressed in bark-cloth¹⁶⁴ may

¹⁶⁴ Before the large-scale and affordable circulation of textile from transcontinental trade (at first a luxury article reserved for royals), bark cloth was commonly worn in East and Central Africa, where it has now gained symbolic status as traditional attire. Among the Nkoya, traditionalist, elderly village women may occasionally be seen to wear it during the Kazanga festival till this very day. Among the Kuba Bushong of Congo, King Shamba c. 17th c. is credited, not only with the introduction of *mankala* (see Fig. 14.5, below) and cassava, but also with that of raffia weaving as a replacement for bark cloth. Interestingly, the product has a very wide transcontinental distribution, suggestive of having belonged to *Pandora's Box*. The latter is the term I give to the pre-Out-of-Africa cultural repertoire of Anatomically Modern Humans, developed

yet appear in dreams. Meaning is implied at the level of the actors, and interpretation is rendered possible at the level of the academic writer and reader, by Schoffeleers' dextrous juggling between these two regionally nested sets of references. Much of the argument is by imputation: the two spheres are suggested, in some unarticulated way whose implications for method and interpretation remain un-argued, to be distinct yet continuous and interconnected, so that meanings and conditions applying to one sphere can be carried over to the other. Is not the crux of the healers' oneiric message that there is a cure for every ailment? Schoffeleers data may not be in the classic anthropological tradition of participant observation, but his argument, as well as his empirical method, is certainly in the line of inspired socio-religious African history for which Terence Ranger set the standard. In fact, no piece by Schoffeleers has reminded me more strongly of the best work by his friend and role model Ranger – for instance the latter's masterly short study of the witch-finder Tomo Nyirenda, also known as Mwana Lesa, a piece which, when I read it in draft in 1972, made a more profound impression on me than almost any modern scholarly text with the exception of Joseph Needham's work, provided me with a splendid model to emulate, and committed me overnight to the study of Central African religious history (Ranger 1975a).

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

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

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

Which village, and which region, anyway? Geographically, some of the data which Geschiere presents as having triggered his analytical curiosity may derive from a Cameroonian village, but on closer inspection his corpus highlights the discourse and practices among African elites and middle-classes, and between anthropologists and selected individual Africans who, as employed anthropo-

in Africa between 200 and 80 ka BP, freeing the image from the negative connotations it has had since Hesiod (Hesiod, *Opera et Dies*, 42-105), and going back to the original meaning of the Greek name Pandora, 'the All-giving'. Yet bark cloth is not mentioned in Brown's (1991) list of universals:

'The range of the bark cloth industry was shown to be very wide. It includes Central America, the West Indies, South America, Africa, among nearly all tribes, India, the Pacific Islands to the extreme outlier Easter Island. The Australians pound out bark to make bags. Ancient classical references were given from Strabo and Theophrastus, and in India from the *Vinaya Mahavagga* [cf. Homer 1951 / 1938 - WvB] and the *Jataka* [cf. Cowell 1895 - WvB].' (Hough 1894: 152).

logical assistants, may be characterised – with some stretch of the imagination – as practical or temporary members of the middle class. I deliberately use the word *corpus*, whose textual and finite nature, with its sense of procedural appropriation rather than humble and defenceless immersion, differs so very much from the standard anthropological material based on participant observation over a prolonged period. The last thing I want to do here is criticising Geschiere for methodological procedures which, far from being defective, constitute deliberate and strategic choices on his part. Having done his bit on occult forces at the village level, in his Maka book (Geschiere 1982) and a large number of shorter pieces, he emphatically and justifiably seeks to move away from the village setting – which anthropologists may be tempted to construct as being unique – among the Maka. He wishes to explore how witchcraft operates in a context of ‘modernity’: the state, the district capital, the city, modern consumption, elite behaviour.

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

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

G. THE POST-COLONIAL WITCHFINDER TETANGIMBO IN WESTERN ZAMBIA. The latter is no facile rhetoric. Having from 1972 frequented a village environment in Kaoma District, Western Zambia, where witchcraft was and has been the dominant discourse for discussing misfortune, conflict, and interpersonal relations in general, both within the family and at the local royal court, I became interested, in the early 1990s, in studying the activities of the witch-finder Tetangimbo. He was reputed to be active around Mangango, a thriving rural centre at the other end of the district, at some 120 kms distance from my main field-work site. Shimbwende, the elderly father of my long-standing research assistant (and by extension one of my own adoptive fathers), a strong-headed but righteous and most respectable village headman and courtier from a prominent family, had as most men his age and in his position attracted sorcery accusations. In accordance with regional custom, he was advised to travel to Tetangimbo and have himself officially cleansed – not knowing that the treatment would be inevitably lethal. Shimbwende was however a quarter Kwacha (less than a few Euro cents) short of the small fee required for cleansing at Tetangimbo’s village, and when he tried to borrow that trifling sum from a distant relative near Mangango, the latter warned him most seriously of the dangers involved; so Shimbwende returned home without going back to the witchfinder’s village – uncleansed, but with his life. When I finally came around to visiting Tetangimbo’s village myself in mid-1994, I found a large totally deserted site with a dozen houses, all devastated by fire; I did not stop to have a look at

the extensive graveyard that was reputed to be one of the village's principal features: here Tetangimbo's assistants were supposed to have interred the alleged witches after killing them. Tetangimbo's case has interesting parallels with that of Mwana Lesa referred to above (cf. Ranger 1975a; Fetter 1971). Surrounded by a considerable number of locally recruited assistants, drawing his clientele from all over Kaoma district, and relying not on the traditional alkaloid bark poison (*mwathe*, *mwave*) that allegedly some people could still survive by vomiting, but on absolutely lethal manufactured agricultural poison which left the accused no chance whatsoever of escaping with her or his life, Tetangimbo is alleged to have killed dozens of people in the latter days of the Kaunda administration and right up to 1992. A criminal investigation was subsequently initiated, but the accused fled to Namibia, the case was never brought to trial, the police records proved nowhere to be traced, and some key witnesses were reputedly killed. Noticing that my own scholarly interest in the case was interpreted by some of the administrators and by the population at the district capital as an attempt to establish myself as Tetangimbo's successor (!), in a context where local actors had difficulty distinguishing between my Botswana-derived *sangomahood* and the sinister forms of occult practice as common in Western Zambia,¹⁶⁵ I realised (and was explicitly warned, and threatened) that further insistence would be inviting violence of either an occult or a physical nature; and after being nearly run over by the truck of one of my probable enemies, I have effectively given up the project. One of the lessons I have learned in the process is: to appreciate the amazing difference between

- the relatively open discourse on witchcraft and on specialist occult powers in the village environment, where even the most terrible suspicions cannot take away – in fact, presuppose – the fact that literally everyone is personally acquainted with, and is considered to engage in, witchcraft, as against
- the anonymous, fragmented, veiled and basically secret discourse on witchcraft in even a small urban centre like a Zambian district capital.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ All over South Central and Southern Africa, diviner-healers are known as *banganga*, *bangaka*, from a root which also occurs in Eurasiatic / Nostratic, where the long-range comparative linguist Dolgopolsky (1998) interprets it to mean 'tying, binding' – note the connection with the 'weaving' theme around Nyambi, above; for Bantu as 'super-Nostratic', cf. Kaiser & Shevoroshkin 1988. These ritual specialists inspire both respect and fear – in the best traditions of the *ambiguity of the sacred* (Durkheim). *Sangomahood*, too, has its sinister dimensions, and not just in the eyes of the beholder. In the first place the practitioner is considered to need a personal, comprehensive and active knowledge of evil in order to be able to combat it when it has stricken the clients – not for nothing is the *sangoma's* habitual animal image that of a leopard, and does the *sangoma*, during séances that may attract many dozens local spectators, publicly suck the blood gushing from the cut throat of a succumbing sacrificial animal, usually a goat. And in the second place, especially the richer and more powerful clients commission, for very considerable sums, the *sangoma's* ancestral powers for success in business and politics, and in that connection some *sangomas* are tempted to perform human sacrifice and to use human bodily substances (boys' penises; the Nkoya *banganga* allegedly prefer children's brains) that can only be procured through murder. There is absolutely nothing in the *sangoma* cult that stipulates such transgressions (personally I have never engaged in them nor *directly* witnessed them – I would not have condoned them anyway). However, at the heart of the *sangoma* cult is the idea of reincarnation, in the light of which murder is lightly considered to be only a minor, routine transition. *Sangomas* who are known to perform such homicidal services for their clients are not admissible to the High-God shrines that constitute the central places of their cult, but nonetheless such practitioners can still occupy leading positions in the cult. Cf. van Binsbergen 2003b: 217.

¹⁶⁶ For a preliminary account, e.g. van Binsbergen 1996d.

It is not only the choice for a national or even international level of variety and comparison, impossible to cover by one investigator's participant observation, that gives the specific flavour of displacement, of operating in an uncharted no-man's-land, to Geschiere's discourse on witchcraft in modern Africa. Having studied the village and written his monograph (1982), he is now operating at a level where the meaning which actors' attribute to their witchcraft practices is no longer informed by the cosmology of some original village environment. Or is it? When we compare Geschiere's approach to that of Schoffeleers, their difference may be tentatively expressed thus:

- Schoffeleers has access to the village cosmology and appeals to it to partially explain the meaning of present-day events at the national level, even if he does not argue in detail the interrelations between town and country and the interpenetration of rival cosmologies in Malawi in recent decades, nor the transformations (if any) which the rural cosmology has to undergo before it can be effective in town;
- Geschiere on the other hand does not closely study the village cosmology and therefore, despite the close attention – throughout his published work – for the interpenetration between the village and the wider national political and economic scene particularly in modern Cameroon, is at a loss to identify (or rather, is no longer interested in identifying) the locus where witchcraft beliefs and practices take shape and meaning; his approach to witchcraft is essentially de-contextualised.

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

But before I elaborate this point, let us explore what could have been gained, in the Cameroonian case, from a closer attention to the rural cosmology of witchcraft.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ When this was first written (1996) my knowledge of Cameroon was limited to library research, co-convenership of a conference, supervision of PhD work on Cameroon, one minor conference paper, and extensive administrative involvement. From 2005 I regularly paid visits to the country and did some field-work there, but not in the Maka milieu which is Geschiere's main rural point of reference. With all their severe limitations of space and time (with in terms of ethnographic method admittedly means: lack of authority), my own ethnographic soundings seem to be rather in support of my interpretation of witchcraft in Cameroon as sketched in the next few pages – but they are still based on far too limited personal participant observation.



Fig. 1.9. In town, witchcraft fears tend to focus on urban concerns such as the acquisition, and subsequent protection, of a modern house and a car. Somerset East Extension, a brand-new site-and-service housing estate in Francistown, Botswana, 1988.

1.8.7. The possible lessons from a rural-orientated cosmological perspective on witchcraft¹⁶⁸

Might not some greater explicit attention for rural-based cosmology, and for the relevant literature in so far as it illuminates the cosmological position of witchcraft, have helped solve a number of dilemmas which now remain in Geschiere's argument? The answer is a qualified yes, yet we shall see that the great value of Geschiere's argument lies in the fact that yet he dared steer away from the village.

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

¹⁶⁸ My argument in this Section was later developed into a theory of 'witchcraft as virtualised boundary conditions of the kinship order', for a contribution to *Witchcraft Dialogues*, edited by George Bond & Dianne Ciekawy; van Binsbergen 201c.



Fig. 1.10. Operating under the smoke of Francistown's magnificent Nyangabgwe hospital, an urban diviner, in what is locally known as 'his surgery', casts his divination tablets (ultimately derived from Arabian and Chinese geomancy, but entrenched in African localisation since c. 1500 CE)¹⁶⁹ in order to diagnose a case of suspected witchcraft. Somerset East squatment, Francistown, Botswana, 1989.

¹⁶⁹ Already in 1561, the Roman Catholic missionary Father Gonçalo da Silveira SJ was condemned to death at the court of Monomotapa (the Shona ruler of a large part of today's Zimbabwe) only a few hundred kilometres from present-day Francistown, on the basis of the outcome of the very same four-tablet oracle; cf. dos Santos 1901. By an interesting parallel, also the Apostle of the Frisians, my Roman Catholic patron St Willibrord, was condemned (ca. 700 CE) by a cleromantic oracle when accused of sacrilege by his heathen royal host in an island North of Frisia, but subsequently acquitted (Lampen 1939: 30, 40).

In my opinion Geschiere falls victim here to his tendency to overlook the place of witchcraft in African *rural* cosmologies. Whatever the difference between acephalous societies and those with centralised political leadership, and whatever the variations across the continent, African cosmologies tend to converge on this point, that they have important moral implications, defining witchcraft as transgressing the moral boundaries defined in those cosmologies. As a statement about the land, which in many parts of Africa is the ultimate economic as well as ontological and moral reality, these cosmologies tend to stipulate a morality which makes the absence of murder, incest and witchcraft a precondition for the fertility of the land (on this point, cf. Schoffeleers 1979; van Binsbergen 1981).

This does not mean that these moral boundaries can never be transgressed; on such transgression in fact depends the construction and legitimisation of forms of identity which go beyond the scope of the ordinary human being inhabiting the standard village: the identities of ruler, diviner-healer, monopolistic trader, blacksmith, bard. The morality implied in witchcraft beliefs therefore particularly informs, and is informed by, the dynamics of face-to-face interaction within commoner villages as standard contexts of production and reproduction, and tends to be suspended or challenged in the context of other modes of production including royal courts, the outside world (trade) and the supernatural (cf. van Binsbergen 1981b, 1992b, 1993c, 2012a).

Geschiere's central point about the moral ambiguity implied in African witchcraft is very well taken, and I could not agree more when he claims that it is this ambiguity which allows witchcraft to insert itself at the heart of African modernity. Such ambiguity however, contrary to what he claims, does not at all explode the moral overtones which the concept carries, in the view of many Africans and of many well-informed anthropologists. Nor can it entirely be relegated to some universal, innate quality of the sacred to be both benevolent and destructive, as stressed by Durkheim (1912) and Otto (1917). That ambiguity largely reflects the material contradictions between the various modes of production involved in African rural social formations, and the ideological and symbolic expressions of those contradictions. Nor is this a feature particular to Africa, as an analysis, along similar theoretical lines, of witchcraft and other forms of magic in the Ancient Near East may show (van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 1999). Because modes of production ultimately revolve on the appropriation of nature, we can understand why the fundamental distinction, in so many African cosmologies, between the ordered human space ('village') and the forces of the wild ('forest', 'bush'), particularly empowers roles situated at the boundary between these domains: the hunter, the musician, the diviner-healer, the blacksmith.

Meanwhile, the amazing point is not so much variation across the vast African continent, but convergence. The 'new' idiom of witchcraft which Geschiere describes for Cameroon, in terms of victims being in some occult way captured

and made to work as zombies, I also encountered during field-work in both Zambia and Guinea-Bissau (but so far not in urban Botswana). The South-East Cameroonian *jambe* as a personalised occult force demanding sacrifices of close kin (the 'old' witchcraft idiom) would appear to be equivalent – in belief, practice and even etymology – to the Zambian concept of the *chilombe* or *mulombe*, a snake with a human head which is secretly bred near the river, first on a diet of eggs and chicks, later demanding that his human counterpart (who breeds and feeds the snake) nominates close kin for sacrifice in exchange for unrivalled powers and success (cf. Melland 1967). What however seems to be absent from the Cameroonian scene is the concept as enshrined in the widespread Bantu root *-rozi* / *-lohi* / *-loi*,¹⁷⁰ with connotations of moral transgression, malevolent magic, malice, murder, incest, not exclusively through the use of familiar spirits but also, or especially, relying on *materia magica*: herbs, roots, parts of human or animal bodies. Extremely widespread¹⁷¹ is the belief that for any type of excessive, transgressive success – attaining and maintaining the status of ruler, diviner-priest or monopolist trader – a close kinsman has to be sacrificed or to be nominated as victim of the occult forces.

1.8.8. The felicitous addressing of virtuality

These are the sort of insights one can pick up at the village level – as Geschiere himself has done in his earlier work. Perhaps he should have tried harder to bring these insights to bear on his supra-local, non-rural argument. But his insistence to explore Cameroonian social and political life beyond the village enables Geschiere in the end to do something truly unique and impressive. He refuses to make his discourse on witchcraft ultimately dependent upon some local village scene. Rather, he describes witchcraft as part of today's national culture of Cameroon, much in the way as one might describe, for instance, qualified sexual permissiveness as part of the national culture of The Netherlands today. He realises that the village context may once have engendered or incubated the witchcraft beliefs and practices which today have such an impact on middle-class and elite life in Cameroon and throughout Africa, but he seems convinced that today such a rural reference is no longer a determining factor for the actors. We are left with a situation which may not at all satisfy the theoretical assumptions of the anthropologist who only feels truly at home in the African village context, but which for those who know African urban life today is utterly convincing: witchcraft beliefs *which are suspended in the air*,¹⁷² which

¹⁷⁰ From proto-Bantu (the transformation $g > l$ is standard): **dŌg-* 'to bewitch', **dŌgi-* 14 'witchcraft' (Guthrie n.d.); **dog-* L 5.4 'bewitch', **dog-i-* 5.4 L1 14 'witchcraft' (Meeussen n.d.), especially prevailing in the specific Bantu-speaking region to which also Nkoya belongs.

¹⁷¹ It may even pervade the discourse and practice of Independent Churches, e.g. the Botswana case of the Guta ra Mwari Church: van Binsbergen 1993c.

¹⁷² When this argument was first presented, Geschiere, much to my regret, took offence at this

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

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

1.8.9. Virtuality and time

Media research (Sandbothe & Zimmerli 1994) has stressed the fact that present-day forms of art and the consumption of images derive their impact particularly from a transformation of the *temporal* basic structure of human perception. In the creation of virtuality, time plays a key role, as I began to realise as soon as I stumbled into the massive field of the social science and the philosophy of

expression, reading it as if I were dismissing the empirical and theoretical underpinning of his argument – although, clearly (why else would I have used the expression ‘utterly convincing?’), I meant something very different: that *emically, in the hands of the Cameroonian actors*, this view of witchcraft had detached itself from the anchorage of an integrated and institutionalised rural cosmology.

time.¹⁷³ Witchcraft beliefs and practices in modern Africa provide an example of this time dimension of virtuality. Geschiere's discussion carries the strong suggestion that these beliefs are situated in some sort of detached no-man's-land, and do no longer directly refer to the village – they are no longer rooted in the productive and reproductive processes there, nor in the attending cosmology. Part of that cosmology, fragmented, disintegrated, ill-understood, and exposed to vaguely similar globalising influences from elsewhere, has been exported to function, more or less, outside the village. Middle classes and elite use English or French to discuss its blurred and collapsed notions.

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

Geschiere's argument also shows signs of such a play with virtual time. For if the 'new' forms of witchcraft in the 1980s-90s use the idiom of the slave trade which has been extinct for almost a century, then this is an *anachronism* – even if the slave trade belongs to a more recent history than *e.g.* the establishment of ancestral cults. In other words, the reference to earlier forms of globalisation (slave trade) is now used in order to express and contest, in a witchcraft idiom, newer forms of globalisation, such as the differential access to consumer goods and post-colonial state power. This is comparable with the processes of selective borrowing between time frames which I tried to capture in my analysis of South Central African cults of affliction, which I also interpreted within a framework informed by 19th-c. CE long-distance trade, in already highly *virtualised* terms: arguing that the cults referred *not* to any particular region, ethnic group, material commodity, or any other concrete referent, but in general to the translocal structure of space which long-distance trade had brought about (van Binsbergen 1981: 155 *f.*, 162 *f.*; 1992b: 262 *f.*).

I must leave it for some other occasion to discuss the details of the interconnec-

¹⁷³ van Binsbergen 1996b, and references cited there, reprinted in the present book as Chapter 14.

tions and variations which Geschiere discovered on this intermediate, virtual plane, which for village-orientated anthropologists is so difficult to conceptualise and which is yet the scene at which much of the symbolic life of African today take place. My aim here has not been to do full justice to his approach, but to show how it is an excellent example of virtuality and its analytical potential.

1.8.10. Section conclusion: The rural-orientated perspective on witchcraft and healing as an anthropological trap?

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

Schoffeleers helped us to pinpoint what could have been learned from a rural-inspired reading of the spatially distant, Cameroonian data, while taking for granted that such a rural perspective was eminently applicable to the Malawian healing movement's discourse. But were the Malawian actors involved really prepared for such a reading, and did they have the symbolic baggage to make such a reading at all relevant to their situation?

Does Schoffeleers' reliance on such rural insight as prolonged participant observation at the village level accords one, yield insight in modern Malawian actors' conscious interpretations of the problem of evil as expressed in Chisupe's mass movement? Or does it merely reveal the historical antecedents of such interpretations – a background which has gone lost to the actors themselves?

Does the analytical return to the village – and I myself have made my own instinctive enthusiasm for such a reading abundantly clear in the preceding pages – amount to valid and standard anthropological hermeneutics, or is it merely a form of spurious *anthropologising* which denies modern Malawians the right to the same detachment from historic, particularistic, rural roots, the same de-contextualisation, which many North Atlantic Africanists very much take for granted in their own personal lives?

It is this very detachment, this lack of connectivity – a break in the chain of semantic and symbolic concatenation –, which the concept of virtuality seeks to capture.

H. RIJK VAN DIJK ON YOUNG MALAWIAN PURITANS. On this point the work of Rijk van Dijk (1992) is relevant, and revealing. In the PhD thesis which he wrote under supervision of Matthew Schoffeleers and Bonno Thoden van Velzen, the assertive puritanism of young preachers in urban Malawi is set against the background of the preceding century of religious change in South Central Africa and of the interpretations of these processes as advanced in the 1970s and 1980s. Here the urban discourse on witchcraft already appears as 'virtual' (although that word is not yet used), in the sense that the urbanites' use of the concept is seen as detached from direct references to the rural cosmology and rural conceptualisations of interpersonal power. Similarly, the events around Chisupe may be interpreted not as an application or partial revival of time-honoured rural cosmological notions, but as an aspect of what van Dijk describes as the

emphatic moral re-orientation in which Malawi, under the instigation of the new president Mr Muluzi, was involved at the national level, at the eve of the 1994 elections, and in the face of the AIDS epidemic (van Dijk 1999). It may be interpreted as an instance of virtualisation.

1.9. The virtual village in the village: A rural ethnic festival in Western Zambia

1.9.1. Introducing the Kazanga festival

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

In Western Zambia a large number of ethnic identities circulate, among which that of the Lozi (Barotse) is dominant because of its association with the Luyana state. The latter had its pre-colonial claims confirmed and even expanded with the establishment of colonial rule in 1900, resulting in the Barotseland Protectorate, which initially coincided with North Western Rhodesia, and after Zambia's Independence (1964) became that country's Western Province. Lozi arrogance, limited access to education and to markets, and the influence of a fundamentalist Christian mission,¹⁷⁴ stimulated a process of ethnic awakening. As from the middle of the twentieth century CE more and more people in Eastern Barotseland and adjacent areas came to identify as 'Nkoya'. In addition to the Nkoya language, and to a few cultural traits recognised as proper to the Nkoya (even if these traits have a much wider distribution in the region), royal 'chiefs', although incorporated in the top ranks of the Lozi aristocracy, have constituted the major condensation points of this identity. The usual pattern of migrant labour and urban-rural migration endowed this identity with an urban component, whose most successful representatives distinguished themselves from their rural Nkoya nationals in terms of education, income and active participation in national politics. While the Lozi continued to be considered as the ethnic enemies, a second major theme in Nkoya ethnicity was to emerge:¹⁷⁵ *the quest for political and economic articulation with the national centre, by-passing*

¹⁷⁴ The South Africa General Mission; cf. Bailey 1913a, 1913b; van Binsbergen 1987c, 1992b, 1994c, 1995f.

¹⁷⁵ In the 1990s a third theme emerged: the blurring of ethnic boundaries in Western Zambia, the attenuation even of Nkoya / Lozi antagonism, in favour of a pan-Westerners regionalism opposing the Northern block which was the then President Chiluba's ethno-political base. This at least is the situation around the National Party, which in bye-elections in Mongu (the capital of Western Province) in early 1994 defeated both MMD and UNIP. As a result of the general elections held during the 1994 Kazanga festival, the office of national chairman went to the leading NP official in Kaoma district.

the Lozi whose dominance at the district and provincial level dwindled only slowly, but who in Zambian national politics were more and more pushed to a peripheral position. In this national linking process the chiefs, with their lack of education, economic and political power, and being the prisoners of court protocol, could only fulfil a symbolic function, even though some of them have served as nominated members of District Councils, District Development Councils, and even of the national House of Chiefs (van Binsbergen 1988c). The main task in the desired centripetal movement fell to the urban Nkoya 'elite' (in fact mainly lower- and middle-range civil servants and salaried workers), and with this task in mind the most prominent among them formed the Kazanga Cultural Association in the early 1980s. In subsequent years, this association has played its self- assigned role impressively: providing an urban reception structure for prospective migrants, contributing to Nkoya Bible translation and the publication of ethno-historical texts, assuming a considerable role at the royal courts next to (and with inevitable friction with!) the traditional royal councils, and campaigning against the Lozi and for the Nkoya cause within various political parties and publicity media, including television and the Internet.

The association's main achievement, however, has been the annual organisation (since 1988) of the Kazanga festival, in the course of which a large audience (including Zambian national dignitaries, the four Nkoya royal chiefs, Nkoya nationals and outsiders), for two days is treated to a very extensive overview of Nkoya songs, dances and staged rituals.

I. WHY SHOULD NKOYA MUSICAL EXPRESSIONS BE DOMINANT IN WESTERN ZAMBIA? For the larger part of the past 150 years the Nkoya have been in a subaltern, subservient position *vis-à-vis* the dominant Lozi – while also in the modern Zambian towns the Nkoya have for decades been considered a despised minority up to the 1980s. Yet even 'Lozi' court music, its song lyrics, even its performers, are of Nkoya origin; and a prominent tradition¹⁷⁶ has it that an early 19-c. CE Luyi king (before the Kololo invasion the dominant group in the Zambezi Flood Plain appears to be known under the name Luyi, instead of Lozi), Mulambwa, humbly requested 'Nkoya' music, and 'Nkoya' king-making and king-protecting medicine, so as to secure his own position among the Luyi. (I put *Nkoya* between quotation marks because even that name appears an anachronism for early 19th-c. CE situations – as an ethnonym, the name Nkoya, deriving from a wooded area on the Zambezi-Kabompo confluence, gained ascendance in the context of Kololo / Lozi / Luyi political control of all of Western Zambia, in the second half of the 19th c.) I do not think that the complex musical situation can be fully explained from the long-range regional dynamics within South Central Africa alone. My research of the past decade, into sub-Saharan Africa's transcontinental continuities (as well as my own amateur steps in Indian ancient court music, as a student of percussion) is now offering an answer:¹⁷⁷ the Nkoya states, those of the Lozi, and in general those of the Lunda cluster to which both groups peripherally belong, and generally held to have emerged in the mid-2nd mill. CE, may be considered remnants of a South Asian-derived, largely Buddhist-informed state system more or less controlling South Central Africa in the

¹⁷⁶ *Likota Iya Bankoya*, 24 and 56; van Binsbergen 1992: 79 and *passim*.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. van Binsbergen in press (a), in press (b), 2012g – the latter including a compelling Buddhist interpretation of Great Zimbabwe.

late 1st and early 2nd mill. CE – and featuring, among others, such activities as music-making and metallurgy, both of them traits traditionally associated with the earliest Nkoya kings. These activities highlight these Nkoya kings' affinities with 'Gypsy' emigrants from South Asia who spread all over the globe, including sub-Saharan Africa – taking refuge from Islamic Moghul rule in India, and its insistence on circumcision. The Kahare kingship, which likewise has a mythical tradition of rejecting circumcision (van Binsbergen 1992b, 1993b) even has 'Kale' as nickname – a widespread Gypsy name meaning 'Black One', notably in South Asian languages such as Singhalese. Another influence on this South Central African state complex seems to have been Shivaite Chola princes taking refuge when their South Asian empire collapsed by the 14th c. CE; and also the Chola had elaborate royal orchestras. I take it that this musical tradition has continued to lend legitimacy to this state system's South Central African successors, even if these have now very largely shed their conscious recollections of South Asia and Buddhism. Yet such Nkoya names as Shikanda;¹⁷⁸ Mangala (< South Asian Mangala, the planet god Mars); the word *mukupele* 'hourglass drum' (< *mahabera*, 'big drum', in Singhalese); the Nkoya's legendary origin from Kola, cf. the *Mahabharata* Kuru, South Asian Kola as ethnic and language name, etc. – in Sanskrit, कौल *kola* means 'pig, hog' Monier-Williams 1899: 256), and it may not be by accident that the earliest Nkoya kings are supposed to have left the capital of Mwata Yamvo – 'Lord Death' – in protest at being housed at or near the pig sties; the mythical Nkoya king Kapesih, associated with the solar or lunar *Conus* shell disc and with the Tower into Heaven, cf. King Kashyapa (Sanskrit: *kaśyapa* कश्यप 'with black teeth', Monier-Williams 1899: 215) from the Buddhist Jataka stories and the Lankan Sigiriya tradition (van Binsbergen, in press (a)). Many other details only noticeable from a South Asian perspective, substantiate my claim of a Nkoya / South Asian link.

Of course, what we have here is a form of bricolage and of invention of tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983): for it would have been impossible to completely revive the nineteenth-century CE Kazanga harvest festival, which comprised only one royal instead of – as currently – four at a time (which is traditionally impossible because the king is supposed to be the one and only hub of the universe), but also human sacrifices. The details of the present-day Kazanga festival I have treated at length elsewhere, and I shall here mainly focus on the virtuality theme.

¹⁷⁸ Shikanda, from: Skanda / Karttikeya / Murugan / Subrahmanya, the South Asian war god whose name is often associated with that of the Macedonian king Alexander the Great / Iskander, who – in the legendary footsteps of the Greek god Dionysos and pharaoh Sesostriis / Senwosret I / III – reached India in the late 4th c. BCE, and lives on in an epic cycle distributed from the Mediterranean to South and South East Asia – Gopala Pillai n.d.; Harrigan n.d. Like




the Ancient Egyptian gods  Horus,  Tefnut and  Shu – and humanity as a whole in the Zulu cosmogony; Colenso 1855: 239 f. – he is reputedly born in a thicket of reeds (hence the epithet *Saravanabhava*), and his name has the same meaning in Sanskrit, 'soaring high', as that of the legendary prince Luhamba in Nkoya. My own Nkoya name is Tatashikanda i.e. *Shikanda's* (my middle daughter's) *Father*. Yet the name Shikanda can also be given a local etymology, notably: 'of the Mukanda puberty and circumcision rite' – cf. Turner 1967c; van Binsbergen 1993b.



Fig. 1.11 a, b. A historic puberty rite in the throes of virtuality: the choir leader encouraging a recently initiated girl to publicly re-enact her coming-out dance, Kazanga festival, Kaoma District, Zambia, 1994; as further aspects of virtuality, notice the girl's and choir-leader's identical wrappers, and the smartly dressed notable capturing the event with his camera.

1.9.2. Virtuality in Kazanga¹⁷⁹

1.9.2.1. Production of identity in Kazanga

The Kazanga festival revolves around the mediation of the local Nkoya identity towards the national, and by implication world-wide space, – a mediation which is to transmute the local symbolic production (the Nkoya have hardly any other products eligible for exchange with the outside world) into a measure of political and economic power via access to the national centre. Besides the *selection* and *presentation* of culture, this involves the *transformation* of culture: the Kazanga festival has the appearance of presenting items of traditional Nkoya culture, *but in fact all these elements have been totally transformed towards a performative format, orchestrated, directed, rehearsed, subjected to the streamlining ordering by an organising elite and its mobilising and mediating ambitions.* The models for this performative format derive from radio, television, the world of Christian missions, agricultural shows, state intervention in national ethnic cultural production, and intercontinental pop media culture.



Fig. 1.12. The articulation of the global and the local in the Kazanga festival: Saluting respectfully from the traditional crouched position, smartly dressed national-level and regional politicians and uniformed soldiers offer, by way of royal tribute, expensive presents (including a bicycle) to the royals seated on the armchairs bottom right (note the fly-switch, a royal prerogative); Kazanga festival, Kaoma District, Zambia, 2011.

¹⁷⁹ The following Section is based on: van Binsbergen 1992a, 1994b.

The Nkoya identity which is thus put on display, is not only recent and situational, but also 'virtual', in the sense that it does not at all coincide any more with what the participating and performing villagers do experience as the self-evident ordering (in terms of space, time and social relations) of village life, in whose context superficially similar (but on closer scrutiny fundamentally different) truly historic forms of symbolic production are situated which might be more properly termed 'Nkoya traditional culture'. The cultural production during the *Kazanga* festival is somehow suspended in the air,¹⁸⁰ it is intangible, no longer anchored in the social and symbolic particularisms of concrete social groups nor available for effective appropriation by such groups. Yet (or perhaps precisely because these features) it is passionately acclaimed among the very actors who consider themselves the representatives of such particularisms.



Fig. 1.13. Virtuality reigns at the Kazanga festival. A clerk of the district branch of the Department of Cultural Services, dressed up in the historic attire of the court jester (kayoni ka Mwene, 'the king's bird' – a cosmogonic evocation), reminds uniformly dressed village girls to position themselves in a regular grid and to keep in line – spatial patterns without roots in any Nkoya rural situation. In the back a poorly dressed chief's court official wields a tape recorder of ghetto blaster size, so as to record the dance troupe's song. Kazanga festival, Kaoma District, 1994.

¹⁸⁰ Above I made the same point about Cameroonian modern witchcraft beliefs and practices as being virtualised. Thus I do agree with Geschiere that they are not merely *residues* of some identifiable historic local traditional beliefs and practices, but (contrary to what Geschiere affirms) they do build upon such a traditional basis by offering a virtualised, modernised version of that basis.

1.9.2.2. Commoditification and virtuality

Cultural presentation in the context of the Kazanga festival is a form of commoditification. The performative format anticipates on the expectations of the visiting non-Nkoya elite, and has to produce goodwill and rapprochement, some sort of symbolic ready cash, to be effective within the wider world of political and economic power which is represented by these dignitaries. There is also more tangible ready cash involved: the performers are paid a little for their services. Moreover, the performances take place in a context which is increasingly dominated by characteristic commodities from the global consumerist culture of reference: the performances are supported – and this is absolutely unheard of in the villages – by public address systems, and all royal protocol has to give in to the urge, among those possessing tape recorders, photo cameras, and video cameras, to ‘record’ the event – an act most characteristic of our electronic age and of the possibilities of individually reproduced and consumed, virtual and vicarious experience it entails. The standardisation of a commoditified cultural production is also borne out by the emphasis (which is in absolute contradiction with historic village patterns) on identical movements according to neat geometrical patterns, the avoidance of ‘offensive’ bodily movements particularly in the body zones singled out by Christian prudery,¹⁸¹ and in the identical uniforms of the members of the main dancing troupes. The representatives of the urban Kazanga troupe, moreover advertise themselves through exceptional commodities such as shoes (which are not only expensive, but offensive and impractical in village dancing), expensive coiffures, sun glasses and identical T-shirts manufactured for the occasion, with imprints advertising the Kazanga festival. The commoditification element is also manifest in the separation – extremely unusual in this rural society – between

- passive, culture-consuming spectators, who explicitly are not supposed to join in the singing and dancing,
- the producers (who clearly act not by their own initiative – as in the village – but as they have been told), and
- the supervising elite (who in their turn single themselves out through such commodities as formal jackets and ties).

1.9.2.3. Embodiment and virtuality

As we have seen under the previous heading, even under the performative format Kazanga has no choice but to present the Nkoya identity (recently constructed as it clearly is, and even reduced to virtuality in the commoditified and invented context of the festival) as inscribed onto the very bodies of those who

¹⁸¹ In other words, no vehement shaking of female buttocks or breasts, and no rhythmic mimicking of human mating movements; these injunctions do restrict the regional *dansante* repertoire very considerably.

define themselves socially as the bearers of that identity, and who express it through their bodily manifestations in music, song and attire. The performance embodies the identity and renders it communicable in an appropriate format, even to an outside world where, before the creation of Kazanga in its present form, that identity did not mean anything of positive value. The stress on uniformity of the performers and their actions paradoxically creates both

- *an illusion of being identical* – which dissimulates actual class differences (for each dance troupe again represents the entire Nkoya nation as a whole), and
- *a sense of distinction* – for very visibly, the urban elite’s troupe is ‘more equal’ (cf. Orwell, *Animal Farm*, 1949) than the other performers, and than the spectators.

J. THE NKOYA KAZANGA FESTIVAL: CULTURAL DISPLAY IMPLIES VIRTUALISATION. In this incorporative context one also borrows from a repertoire which has certainly not been commoditified even if it is performative: dressed in leopard skins, around the temples a royal ornament made of the *Conus* shell from the Indian Ocean, and brandishing an antique executioner’s axe,¹⁸² an aged royal chief, with virtuoso accompaniment from a hereditary honorary drummer of the same age (he has always been far above performing with the state-subsidised royal orchestra in the routine court contexts), performs the old Royal Dance which since the end of the nineteenth century CE was hardly seen any more in this region; at the climax the king (for that is what he shows himself to be) kneels down and drinks directly from a hole in the ground where beer has been poured out for his royal ancestors – the patrons of at least his part of the Nkoya nation, implied to share in the deeply emotional cheers from the audience. And young women who have long been through girls’ puberty initiation, perform that ritual’s final dance (cf. van Binsbergen 1987a), without any signs of the appropriate stage fright and modesty, and with their already too mature breasts not nude and in full view (as is the requirement during the girl’s coming-out dance at her puberty ceremony), but against all tradition tucked into conspicuous white bras; yet despite this performative artificiality their sublime bodily movements, which in this case are far from censored by any Christian canon, approach the village-based original sufficiently close to bring the spectators, men as well as women, to ecstatic expressions of a recognised and shared identity.

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

¹⁸² All these attributes – regalia, in fact – have now become non-commodities, pertaining to a royal circuit that in the present time is no longer mercantile, although it was more so during the nineteenth century CE.

1.9.2.4. Virtuality and the role of the state

With all the attention for performative control, matched with a strong suggestion of authenticity, it is clear that the Kazanga leadership does not for one moment lose sight of the fact that the festival is primarily an attempt to exchange the one scarce good which one locally has in abundance, competence in symbolic production (in the form of music, song and dance), for political and economic power. The national-level dignitaries, more than the royal chiefs, let alone the audience, constitute the spatial focus of the event, and a large part of the programme is devoted to the dignitaries' welcome speeches and other formal addresses. Since the political arena is indeed the appropriate place (and not only in Zambia) to exchange symbolic production for development projects, political allocation, and patronage, the harvest of the series of Kazanga festivals since 1988 is by now eminently manifest in a marked increase of Nkoya participation at the national level in the government executive, in representative bodies and in the media, and in a marked decrease of the stigmatisation to which the Nkoya used to be subjected under Lozi domination until well after Independence. Kazanga is an example of how an ethnic group can not only articulate itself through symbolic production, but may actually lift itself by its own hairs out of the bog, Münchhausen fashion (Bürger 1788 / 1978).

1.9.2.5. Virtuality and inequality

Above I have already emphasised how the *categorical* (i.e. logical, conceptual) *equality* ('identity' hardly means anything else) of all Nkoya nationals – in the light of the shared, recently constructed Nkoya identity as manifested at Kazanga – is, by contrast, constantly accompanied by the manifestation of all sorts of *inequalities*: those between peasants and urbanites, between peasants and salaried workers; between elite leaders, performers and spectators. I regret that in the present scope I cannot deal with other, equally interesting inequalities (like those between men and women, and between Christians and traditionalists). Undoubtedly the Kazanga leaders perceive themselves as being altruistically subservient to an abstract ethnic collectivity, but in fact their ethnic mediation primarily serves their own position, especially when and if their mediation is successful and begins to be reciprocated from the national centre. Now that the Kazanga festival has existed for more than thirty years, we can see how the festival has served as the means to launch Nkoya leaders as regional and national-level politicians, who use the festival to canvas for votes which, at their party's headquarters, they then exchange for important and remunerative political nominations.

1.9.3. Cultural performance as virtual production

When we see Kazanga as a response to globalisation, then perhaps we can better understand the transformation from spontaneous cultural production to

performance, which characterises the festival. When introducing the concept of virtuality in Section 1.2, I had occasion to refer to twentieth-century CE analytical philosophy, where a particular class of statements has been identified: those incapable of being either false or true, *e.g.* 'I promise that I shall come' (Austin 1962; *cf.* Nuchelmans 1971). Significantly, the term 'performative' has been adopted to denote such statements.

Such an interpretation of the performative quality of behaviour is of special significance in the context of a village society like that of the Nkoya, which is largely dependent on economic self-reliance through agriculture, hunting and gathering. Performative behaviour does not follow the lead of empirical, *productive* thought techniques on which control over the environment, hence survival, depends; it takes a distance from these modes of thought, and moves in a space and time geared to the production not of food, but of imitation food, of symbols. Is this perhaps an answer to the question as to why in Kazanga, under conditions of globalisation, the performative, and not the productive, aspect of culture is so central? As if the productive factor is deprived of all meaning in the modern context, in the festival today that factor, in the face of the rich history of production in this region (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2012a, 1992b: 208 *f.*), is merely vaguely indicated by one or two hunting dances out of a programme packed with scores of dances, but originally, a century ago, Kazanga as a first fruits festival hinged on agricultural production. Such a transition does meet the ecological realities in the land of Nkoya toward the end of the twentieth century CE. During the 1970s and 1980s game, until then fairly abundant, largely disappeared through the massacres which ethnic strangers from Angola wrought with machine guns among the big game, while subsistence agriculture as a mode of livelihood has virtually collapsed in the face of drought, urbanisation, commercialisation of agriculture, and the monetarisation of the rural economy. In the erosion of the local production lies the dependence upon the outside world, which is confronted with non-productive performative behaviour. In the context of the village society of Western Zambia, the shift from production to performance is the most obvious manifestation of virtuality as an aspect of globalisation.

1.10. Conclusion

I hope that after my theoretical explorations, in the first Section of this Chapter, the case studies I have presented in the remainder of this Chapter have set some descriptive basis for a further theoretical elaboration of the concept of virtuality in a context of globalisation in Africa today. The kind of problems I have tried to pinpoint continue to stand out in my mind as both relevant and tantalising, and I realise that my own commitment to the study of globalisation is largely fuelled by my hope that somewhere in that sort of perspective these

analytical problems which have haunted me for a long time (*cf.* 1981: ch. 6) may come closer to a solution; but the present Chapter makes only a small step towards such a solution, and in the process reveals how difficult it is to capture, in academic discourse whose hallmark is consistency, the contradictions which exist in reality.

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

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