

## Chapter 11

# Philosophising à l'africaine

## J.-B. Amougou on M. Hebga's rationality

*Having been a well-received guest at the Department of Philosophy, University Yaounde I, Cameroon, in 2005, the next year I was invited to serve as external examiner and chairman of the examination board, in regard of the PhD public defense of Jean-Bertrand Amougou, analysing the remarkable philosophical work of the Cameroonian Roman Catholic priest Meinrad Hebga; the latter's approach to rationality made him one of the few philosophers, worldwide, to deal with paranormal phenomena, so central to African worldviews and religions. This short Chapter essentially presents the text of my examiner's report.*

Amougou, Jean Bertrand, 'La "rationalité" chez P.M. Hebga: Herméneutique et dialectique', thèse de doctorat, Faculté des Arts, Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université de Yaoundé I, République du Cameroun, 2006.<sup>474</sup>

### 11.1. Outline of Amougou's argument

The project of J.-B. Amougou's thesis is to situate the work of the eminent Cameroonian philosopher Meinrad Hebga in the context of one of the most central

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<sup>474</sup> Throughout this Chapter, the expression 'the author' refers to Mr (subsequently Dr) J.-B. Amougou, while for P.M. Hebga as the subject of that author's analysis other, hopefully unambiguous designations will be used. Written without initial capital (in order to distinguish from the Chapters in the present book), 'chapter' in this Chapter only refers to the subdivision's of Dr Amougou's text, numbered not by Arabic numbers (as the Chapters of the present book), but by Roman ones.

traits of the Western tradition in philosophy, notably the pursuit of rationality as the philosopher's hallmark and as the proclaimed touchstone of all human endeavours.

For this purpose, the author first clears the ground by sketching Hebgá's style of writing and his biography, by setting the thesis' theoretical and practical framework, and by defining his own methods as a philosopher – with emphasis on the possible contribution from comparative linguistics, and on the tension – so characteristic of the history of ideas in the Judaeo-Christian tradition – between reason and faith.

Then, in Part I of the thesis the author deals with the cultural rootedness of rationality.

In chapter I he returns to the historical roots of the discourse on rationality, and sketches the trajectory of this concept in modern Western philosophy. Here one main question line of the author's argument becomes manifest: *how can an African philosopher come to terms with the problem of rationality, given the fact that, for centuries (both in the specialist domain of philosophy – cf. Hegel,<sup>475</sup> who denied Africans both history and rationality – and in the much wider social domain of perceptions, stereotypes, and social interaction) the West has defined Africans as the very opposite of Westerners, and as deprived of the kind, or at least of the level, of rationality proclaimedly constitutive of the West?* African and North American varieties of Afrocentricity are invoked to propose a solution to this dilemma: as soon as cultural, including philosophical, continuity is established between present-day sub-Saharan Africa, and Ancient Egypt, and as soon as the cultural, including philosophical, indebtedness of Ancient Greece to Ancient Egypt is acknowledged, we have one possible way out of what otherwise could amount to an exercise in self-annihilation – I mean the pursuit of Western-style philosophy by an African philosopher like Hebgá. In passing we note that in the latter's case this dilemma is doubly felt because Hebgá is not only

- a philosopher but also
- a Roman Catholic priest,

and thus, as an African, has built his social and intellectual life around his personal commitment to two highly successful North Atlantic cultural and institutional complexes whose uninterrupted presence in Africa is as recent as it is problematic from a point of view of the global politics of knowledge and of what Mudimbe (another prominent African philosopher, with a somewhat similar background as Hebgá's) has so aptly called 'the liberation of African difference'.

M. EGYPTOCENTRIC AFROCENTRISM AS PROBLEM AND AS SOLUTION. Yet the issues involved here are rather more problematic than Afrocentrist-orientated intellectual opinion in

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<sup>475</sup> For details see above, footnote 370.

present-day Cameroon would seem to realise.

The continuity between present-day sub-Saharan Africa, and Ancient Egypt, claimed for two centuries by African American thinkers, has become a matter of more general international scholarly debate in the last few decades (Diop, Asante, Obenga, Bernal, Lefkowitz, Fauvelle). One cannot simply close one's eyes for the complexity of that debate, and for the force of evidence on both sides, and simply proceed to take such continuity as an established and unproblematic fact. Even the many correspondences that undeniably can be noted, may be explained in two fundamentally different ways: Ancient Africa engendering (in part) Ancient Egypt, or Ancient Egypt engendering (in part) present-day Africa.<sup>476</sup> Recent Afrocentrist scholarship, aided by the somewhat unfounded assertions which Bernal spuriously derived from the *Black Athena* debate, has more and more stressed the indebtedness of Egypt to sub-Saharan Africa, interpreting Egypt as the first-born and best developed child of Africa. However, it is time the scales are made to swing back to equilibrium, for in the three thousand years of its existence as one of the most powerful states in the world, the Egyptian inroads into sub-Saharan Africa have been so extensive, so persistent, and so well documented both in written texts and in the distribution of artefacts, myths, and cultural and political institutions, that in many ways we are entitled to see latter-day African cultures as partly indebted to Egyptian prototypes of five to two millennia ago.

But there is an even more fundamental problem at hand here. Suppose the attempt at historical reconstruction via Ancient Egypt could be demonstrated to be unsuccessful, to be based on data that, on further scrutiny, could not stand the test of both African and global scholarship. Suppose we would be forced, by unpredictable future advances in scholarship, to sever all links between Ancient Egypt and Africa in historical times. Would that be enough to, once again, deprive Africans of their rationality? Certainly not! Assist in the proceedings of one African court at the village level, and one is forever convinced that sound argument, deliberation, balancing of opinion, – all the ingredients of Ancient Greek rationality, also qualify as eminently African in nature, if not also in origin. In other words, in addition to the historical argument one needs an ontological argument, based on an empirically underpinned philosophical assessment of the modern life worlds of people inside and outside Africa.

This is, in other words, the debate on the rationality or irrationality of modern African life, such has been waged for a century or more by the students of African societies and African religious forms.<sup>477</sup> We cannot summarise that debate here in a few words, but some of its stakes are clear:

1. there is the need to avoid hegemonic, essentialist, othering and ethnocentric constructions – in critical awareness of the historical fact that the global North has, for centuries, sought to define itself by denying the global South
2. hence there is the need for African voices to correct the distortions so typical of Western intellectual appropriations of African life and thought
3. and to the extent to which the debate under (2) is typically an intellectual debate,

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<sup>476</sup> This sums up 'Fairman's Dilemma', cf. Fairman 1965; O'Connor & Reid 2003; van Binsbergen 2010, with extensive discussion and references.

<sup>477</sup> Some important steps in that debate have been: Evans-Pritchard 1972 / 1937; Gluckman 1955; Horton 1967, 1971, 1975, 1993; Hountondji 2007; Sogolo 1998; Hebga 1998; MacGaffey 1978.

waged in cities and universities away from the villages and the poor urban compounds, we need the forceful input of oral-based local African thought.

Regardless of whether one agrees with the author's proposed way out, the problems indicated here are most important, and lend a particular topical, knowledge-political and existential value both to Hebga's work, and to the author's project and thesis.

In chapter II the architecture of rationality is considered, first from a point of view (so dear to Hebga) of linguistics and linguistic philosophy, then (in a broad inspiration ranging from Marx to Foucault) as liberation and affirmation of self and its concerns, where the project of the Enlightenment (Kant's *sapere aude!* i.e. 'have the courage to know!' – 1784 / 1981) appears in an interesting new light.

But already chapter III has to introduce the aporias of rationality, of which (partly in continuity with chapter I and its knowledge-political thrust) five specific aporias – one might object: *only* five! – are mentioned, all revolving on the universalist claims that are inherently associated with rationality. The author's choice of aporias is commendable:

1. Eurocentrism
2. subjectivism and freedom
3. beyond top-down knowledge
4. beyond aestheticism
5. hegemony.

Hebga's position is then defined as seeking a way out of, especially, aporia (5), as it confronts philosophers working 'in the global periphery'.

This introduces Part II of the thesis, which deals with the way in which Hebga employs rationality in a bid to escape from the aporias indicated above.

Inevitably, this means in the first place a return to the problematic of reason and faith, central to chapter IV. Close to the Ricoeurian (1974) inspiration of the conflict of interpretations, the argument in this chapter amounts to an exploration of the possibility of truth. A dialectics is invoked between 'the domain of experience' and 'the experiential horizon' – God belonging to the latter. The theologico-ethical and the epistemological implications of a link between reason and faith are sketched in a meagre five pages.

Then follow two chapters which, although central to the thought of Hebga, link up with earlier chapters more than with chapter III. In chapter V 'The irrational in history' is discussed, again with reference to Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, and the modern North Atlantic – and their apparent contrast with present-day Africa, where at the descriptive level both sorcery beliefs, and selected (real or putative) sorcery practices are discussed.<sup>478</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> One is puzzled by the fact that such morally neutral claims of the defiance of materiality, space and time (in levitation, multilocation, and apparitions) are discussed in one breath with

In accordance with the complexity and relative heterogeneity of Hebga's thought, the next chapter, VI, investigates the status of the irrational in traditions and in 'revealed religions', i.e. world religions. An attempt is made to analytically characterise religious belief. The most interesting point in this chapter is the rendering of Hebga's critique of 'the myth of animist religions', which amounts to a critique of (politically convenient, at the time) colonial constructions of the image of Africans as amoral, as lacking the concept of a supernaturally underpinned cosmological order; in the process, the impositional, hegemonic nature of such North Atlantic renderings of African religious forms is recognised. This leads to an attempt at vindication of African religious traditions, along with the recognition of irrational elements in Christianity and Islam.

Nonetheless, the chapter under discussion is not very satisfactory, in that it seeks to treat, within a very limited scope, philosophical, theological and ethnographic problems that have filled entire specialist libraries. Dramatically unable, understandably, to accommodate the major theoretical and descriptive studies in this field, the author chooses just to take the lead of Hebga, and to follow him in the latter's *eclectic* selection of problematics and themes. Hence affirmations about African religious forms are made which, although in principle defensible, yet are not defended in the sense of being underpinned by any more extensive theoretical and empirical argument.

What is more, an hegemonic element sneaks into the use of the concept of 'the irrational', in the first place by the author, perhaps also by Hebga: especially in a counter-hegemonic, affirmatively peripheral attempt at philosophising from Africa, like the author's and Hebga's, a distinction should be made between

1. that which is problematic because it presents an image of reality that – as an inherently logical fallacy – cannot be supported in *any* tradition of thought, of whatever space and time (e.g. a child producing his or her mother; although even that is mythologically not totally unthinkable; e.g. in Roman Catholicism, the status of the Virgin (!) Mary as the Mother of God and as a creature of God at the same time, may be a case in point)
2. that which is problematic because it presents an image of reality that may be unpopular, suppressed or unthinkable in the natural-science tradition of globalised (but essentially North Atlantic) specialist natural science, whereas in other thought traditions that image may be perfectly rational (i.e. formally well-constructed in terms of the

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the occult technologies of interpersonal power and transgression, as in 'mystical cannibalism'; in Africa and elsewhere, the world of sorcery constitutes an idiom of power whose social and existential parameters are far more interesting, wide-ranging, and decisive, than merely the real or proclaimed defiance of nature law that may be involved, or is claimed to be involved. Before becoming an interesting natural-science puzzle, sorcery (real and / or dreamed) is an idiom and an act of social and moral transgression. The topic is discussed repeatedly in the pages of the present book, see the Index, below.

locally prevailing intersubjective procedures of logic and conceptualisation) and intersubjectively acceptable – for instance the possibility that telepathy is a genuine fact of life; or the possibility that – as astrology has it – the pattern of the stars may significantly correspond with the ups and downs in human life; or the possibility that – even beyond placebo effect and psychological warfare – sorcerers may genuinely harm their victims.

The author calls both (1) and (2) irrational, and that is itself a naïve reflection of an hegemonic, North Atlantic position, according to which only current North Atlantic scientific thought is allowed to monopolise the predicate ‘rational’ for itself, while considering all other knowledge systems in the world as fundamentally irrational hence invalid, except to the extent to which they can be shown to be systematically equivalent with the current North Atlantic system. I cannot go into details here,<sup>479</sup> but the author’s position is untenable, especially from an African point of view.

Chapter VII seeks to specifically investigate how Hebga has sought to resolve rationality’s aporias as identified above. In this chapter the author’s emphasis is on ‘cognitively-instrumental’ rationality, in other words on epistemological, methodological, and science-philosophical aporias, of the kinds investigated at length in the work of Popper and his associates and successors. This is all the more remarkable, because such aporias were not exactly very prominent among the five enumerated in chapter III: those five mainly resided in the global politics of knowledge, they had to do with global power inequalities more than with epistemological underpinning of knowledge. This is a fundamental *non-sequitur* in the author’s argument (the only major one, as far as I am concerned), which is only partially compensated by the interesting rendering the author gives of Hebga’s theory of human-animal metamorphoses, in other words, of therianthropy. Incidentally, Hebga’s position here (stressing the mere appearances of therianthropy over the local actors’ claims or beliefs of therianthropy as a tangible fact) should not be allowed to pass as the ultimate wisdom on this point, before the author has ascertained whether there, again, Hebga (and the author himself) may have fallen victim to naïve and unwarranted adoption of the hegemonic North Atlantic scientific position, on this point. Therianthropic themes abound in sub-Saharan Africa, including Cameroon (de Rosny 1981) – such themes are often attested in hunter-gatherers’ rock art which may often be several millennia old; and also in historical times, and at present, kings, diviner-healers, sorcerers are frequently claimed to turn into animals and to manifest themselves as such especially when in trance or after death; and although such apparent fantasms cannot be accommodated within modern North Atlantic / global natural science, by a different ontology (*e.g.* one that sees apparently concrete manifestations in the world of the senses as

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<sup>479</sup> See van Binsbergen 2003b, 2007b, *i.e.* Chapter 13 below.

the occasional *products* of thoughts and dreams, instead of exclusively the other way around) they are perfectly thinkable, and should not be dismissed so readily on the basis of first principles.

We have come to Part III of the thesis, which deals with the relevance of Hebga's philosophical investigations.

This topic is in the first place dealt with in chapter VIII, on Transdisciplinarity. After invoking the interplay of parallel branches of science (and scholarship), the main argument of this chapter is occupied with the epistemology of the irrational. Here Hebga's fascination for the modern sciences, ranging from natural science to psychology, becomes clear – as does the author's impressive capability to follow his subject on these scientific investigations (where most philosophers, African, North Atlantic, or from whatever part of the world, would be at a loss!) and to illuminate them in the light of Plato and Aristotle. Transdisciplinarity, methodological pluralism, pluralism in philosophical anthropology, are the catchwords here.

But while this suffices to kindle our admiration both for the author and for Hebga, the chapter leaves one big question totally open: one can understand how an African philosopher, who (like Hebga does, and the author himself) takes African knowledge traditions seriously, ends up with a pluralist and transdisciplinary critique of the established edifice of global (read between the lines: North Atlantic) academic disciplines; but, once again, *would such an author not derive anything of lasting intercontinental, nay global value, from African knowledge traditions?* Is the African position merely an invitation to take the North Atlantic hegemonic heritage with a slight pinch of salt, *but not to flavour it and augment it much more radically with whatever the world and global culture can learn from African knowledge traditions?* (This was the main point of my book *Intercultural Encounters* (2003b), where that question, far from being rhetorical, is answered affirmatively, in favour of the lasting and global value of African knowledge systems; it is also the refrain of the present volume, especially Chapter 16). One cannot blame the author for this intellectual reticence or prudery (or lack of courage) on the part of Hebga; if the latter's oeuvre does not go into that direction the author could scarcely maintain that yet it does. However, it would have shown much greater critical distance on the part of the author, and would have brought Hebga's project a whole step further, if the author had himself brought out and confronted the central question I have italicised a few lines up. Attention for that question would have made this thesis, beyond the danger of being mere Hebgaian hagiography (a danger which the author successfully avoids), into, much more positively, a innovative and substantial contribution to the development of a philosophy that is forcibly counter-hegemonic, – rather than resigning oneself to marginal revisionism; the latter often seems to be the position of peripheral powerlessness, to which the global system *appears to* condemn African thinkers.

chapter IX seeks to outline how Hebga has philosophically responded to present-day problematics. Again, the author is captive to the particular selection of topics that is found in Hebga's work, hence the heterogeneity of this chapter, ranging from the scientifico-mystical work of Teilhard de Chardin (cf. 1955, 1956, 1965), via the epistemological studies of Edgar Morin (1973, 1980), to the popular pioneer work in chaos theory by Prigogine & Stengers (1984, 1988). Against the background of Hebga's thought and problematics as set out in the previous chapters, one can very well understand why Hebga has shown an interest in precisely these three topics. Yet, their eminent relevance, and the glimpses they offer of Hebga 'at work in his philosophical workshop', so to say, would have been much clearer if the author would have treated these topics in the course of those preceding chapters: Teilhard de Chardin under reason and faith (not by accident have Hebga and Teilhard their Roman Catholic priesthood in common), Morin under the definitional exposé on rationality, and chaos theory under chapter VIII: *Transdisciplinarity*.

In the very short chapter X the argument comes down to earth and leads to a theory of practice, which concentrates on the irrational in social and political phenomena especially in Africa. The chapter is too short to make an impact, and it reveals the essential alienation of even Hebga's philosophy, apparently incapable of confronting the pressing problems of everyday life in the African continent today. Perhaps much deeper reflection on the nature of power, sorcery and practicality (as varieties of rationality and irrationality) in Africa would have brought more light here. Excessive loyalty of the author to Hebga (but see chapter XI) may have prevented the author from exploring practical implications and applications of Hebga's thought, beyond what the latter has already articulated himself in terms of scientism and the quest for a non-hegemonic truth. To the extent that global hegemony is part of the causes of the African predicament, both Hebga's work and Amougou's illuminating exegesis contain the invitation to counter-act such hegemony in concrete situations and forms of knowledge production – but apparently, that invitation could not yet be honoured within the present thesis itself.

In the final chapter the author deals with a number of objections that have been brought against Hebga's thought. This is an excellent discussion of a body of critical literature, for which the author, the ultimate specialist in Hebga's thought, is eminently equipped. The author clearly identifies how the confusion as to the nature and (de-)merits of 'ethno-philosophy',<sup>480</sup> endemic to Afri-

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<sup>480</sup> 'Ethnophilosophy' used to be a common, now somewhat obsolete designation for an African academic knowledge production based, not so much on North Atlantic models and templates and their appropriation and innovation in the hands of philosophers based in Africa, but on a creative and critical thinking through of specifically African worldviews, cultural themes, and oral-literary expressions. Especially the work by the Beninese philosopher Hountondji *Sur la 'philosophie africaine': Critique de l'ethnophilosophie / African philosophy: Myth and reality* (1976 / 1983) has been highly influential in discrediting this first-generation African philosophy, in order to replace it by North Atlantic and global approaches. The question as to the possibility and the nature of African philosophy has absorbed too much of the creativity and other re-



can philosophy, has also infiltrated the public critical discussion of Hebga's work, and the author disentangles that discussion with considerable skill. However, this final chapter reveals a fundamental weakness of this project as a whole: one only writes a doctoral thesis about a philosopher's oeuvre if that philosopher is recognised as, or is to be promoted to the rank of, a great philosopher. Hence we have the somewhat puzzling, though forgivable, situation that unique merits are attributed to Hebga (who was himself present, and honoured, at the public examination), whereas to a less involved observer like myself his thought would rather look essentially eclectic, and (with unmistakable tendencies to religious and philosophical universalism) not radical enough from an African and counter-hegemonic perspective; let me stress that *a counter-hegemonic perspective is almost inevitably counter-universalist, since the principal strategy of hegemony is to present a particular interest group's particularisms as universals – whilst endowing such a presentation with a unique sense of reality and validity, by the employ of means that may range from religious indoctrination to media manipulation to material dependence to military threat.*

Hebga has touched on a wide range of topics and his work reveals a wide range of inspirations. Perhaps his essential dilemma (a bit like Mudimbe's) has been that, as a Roman Catholic priest, he has throughout his life been wedded to a universalist intellectual and institutional project (the Roman Catholic Church) to such an extent that the regional and local qualities of *African* knowledges had to remain a declared theoretical possibility for him, but never (as far as I can see) became a tangible and lived, *central* reality.

Finally, as far as formal execution is concerned this thesis project shows a considerable level of accomplishment, despite a number of misspellings, which are compensated by a useful index. The bibliography is somewhat spotty, and is tilted towards classic works, but one could hardly expect any better given the kind of library facilities the author had to work with locally.

## 11.2. Conclusion

*Our conclusion is obvious: the overall conception and execution of the work show a talented scholar of both the ability and the originality to be awarded the degree of doctor of philosophy.* This is a good thesis by any international standard I am aware of, even though above I had occasion (like with any doctoral thesis written whenever and wherever) to spot serious omissions and flaws in the author's argument.

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sources of the discipline in the African continent, and rather than contributing to it here, I would advocate the treatment of Africa's very tangible problems including: the state, violence, corruption, exploitation, gender equality, counter-hegemony, cultural politics, and a credible and inspiring blueprint for the future.

Personally I regret that the conception of the thesis project left no option but putting Hebga on a pedestal and singing his praises, also in cases where a discussion of his limitations would have been intellectually more stimulating and profitable. The author's unmistakable closeness to Hebga (the thesis is even dedicated to him, of all people) must have been both a source of illumination and encouragement, but has certainly also imposed limitations on the incisive and critical nature of the author's argument. I also regret that the argument is politically correct as far as Africa and Afrocentricity is concerned, but no more than that – I would have preferred a passionate, rather more radical Afrocentrist *critique* of Hebga, which would have shown both the considerable merits of that eminent philosopher, and the considerable limitations which, like all humans, also he has.

But all this is just details. While many African philosophers continue to fight over the nature and the possibility of an African philosophy, Hebga and Amougou are showing that African philosophy is simply a solid and impressive fact, capable of improvement perhaps, but alive, dynamic, aware of its historic mission, and fully equipped to accomplish it. It has been an honour to stand by the sideline and make a slight contribution to what promises to be a brilliant future.

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***Part IV. Beyond Africa: The price of  
universalism***

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## Chapter 12

# 'An incomprehensible miracle': Central African clerical intellectualism versus African historic religion

### A close reading of Valentin Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith*

*I was a poet and a literary prose writer before I seriously engaged with anthropology and philosophy. My literary work forms a parallel world to my scholarly output; and remains outside the scope of the present volume.<sup>481</sup> However, when I was asked to deliver the opening lecture in the series 'Reading Mudimbe', organised by my friends Louis Brenner and Kai Kresse at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, United Kingdom, February 2001, where I had been a frequent guest over the decades, I found that my techniques of literary criticism, especially the technique of close reading, did more for me than the academic scholarly approach to texts that I had been using in social science and in philosophy. Through his many published texts Mudimbe appeared to me in the first place as a literary writer (he too had published novels and poetry), and I found that a literary perspective was also the only one that could do justice to what I found to be his essence: his struggles with death and homelessness – the modern counterpart of Gilgamesh and Odysseus, Cusanus, Erasmus and von Leibniz. When the February 2001 meeting was repeated in May 2001 in the presence of Mudimbe himself, that was when I met him for the first time, and immediately I realised that what really appealed to me in his person was the Central African he was, unmistakably my homeboy<sup>482</sup> in appearance, bodily language, and the pitch of his voice –*

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<sup>481</sup> In a recent presentation (Rostock 2015) I turned this around and maintained that my scholarly work was in fact a by-product of my literary endeavours – and for those critical of my scientific methods, this may be illuminating.

<sup>482</sup> The South Central African English expression for people from the same geographical and ethnic background. Many ancestors of the present-day Nkoya of Zambia, and especially their royal dynasties, reputedly came from Congo and have shared a part Luba identity with Mudi-

despite the fact that he spoke in French or English, chose to dress in clerical black even though he had left his noviciate as a Benedictine monk decades behind him, and was an (ex-)married agnostic, who (much like the great scholars mentioned above, half a millennium earlier) spent his existence travelling, writing in inns and on horseback, taking every day the time to read his Roman Catholic breviary in Latin – which is only required from active Roman Catholic clergymen, but, as he said, was good exercise for someone teaching Latin as a Romance scholar. On the occasion of our first meeting, he did not mince words:

'You are good, Wim, but you are too harsh'

is how he adequately and deservedly summed up my interminable analysis of his editorial peccadilloes and philosophical bricolages, but he did not contradict my conclusion that in the end, all these decorative trappings of historical and philosophical scholarship mainly served to allow him to make a relentlessly universalist poetical statement about death and homelessness. After what a lesser mind would have taken as offensive, devastating criticism, as in the present Chapter, his response was unique: we became close friends. And it was as such that together we handled the PhD examination of one of Mudimbe's former students of Latin (Julie Duran-Ndaya), and visited a rapidly declining (and, as a severe Alzheimer case, embarrassingly condescending) Matthew Schoffeleers in the last year of the latter's life; Schoffeleers had been Mudimbe's contemporary in their class at the Louvanium, Leopoldville, Congo, forty years earlier. This was only one in a long series of clerical contacts that Mudimbe has continued to entertain over the decades, for old times' sake – and in order to keep alive (or to bring to life?) the liberation of African difference (Mudimbe's term) which, in his eyes, Central-African clerical intellectualism had brought about.<sup>483</sup>

To Patricia Saegerman, beacon of my life and thought, born in Stanleyville, Belgian Congo

## 12.1. Introduction

*Tales of Faith* is also, and perhaps mainly, about an incomprehensible miracle – that is, an extraordinary event in the world. These lectures constitute an invitation to meditate on my composite narrative, which contemplates difficult statements that are contradictory in their effects and, in any case, unbelievable for the agnostic that I am (Mudimbe 1997: 202).

Born in 1941 in the former Belgian Congo (subsequently Zaïre / the Democratic Republic Congo), and at the time of writing<sup>484</sup> holding appointments at Stanford and Duke in the USA, as well as being Chair of the Board of the International African Institute, London, United Kingdom, Mudimbe is one of the leading Africanist scholars of our time. His large oeuvre spans the fields of *belles lettres* (poetry and novels), philosophical essays, classical philology, the history

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mbe. The Nkoya and Luba languages are almost mutually intelligible.

<sup>483</sup> This text met with considerable appreciation from the part of my African colleagues and students. The Nigerian philosopher Sanya Osha devoted a critical essay to it (2003, 2011-2013).

<sup>484</sup> This was first written in early 2001.

of ideas, and edited works assessing the state of the art in African studies especially philosophy. In Africanist circles he is probably best known for two books that trace the political and intellectual trajectory of conceptions of Africa from Antiquity to the late twentieth century CE: *The Invention of Africa*, and *The Idea of Africa* (Mudimbe 1988, 1994a). There is no way in which, in the scope of the present Chapter, I can begin to do justice to what is clearly one of the great creative cosmopolitan minds, and one of the great intellectual and literary oeuvres, of our times. I have to substantially narrow down the scope of my argument, and I will do so on the basis of a number of related considerations. I think it is fair to situate Mudimbe in a particular social and intellectual context, and this is not difficult since his publications abound with salient autobiographical detail – not to say that his entire oeuvre may be read as a sustained attempt at autobiographical self-definition.<sup>485</sup> One of his books, *Tales of Faith* (1997),<sup>486</sup> happens to be an intellectual and spiritual autobiography disguised as a detached history of ideas of Central African intellectuals and their work and aftermath in the twentieth century CE:

'Here, in concluding what is more a reflection on myself than strict research on African representations of *Tales of Faith*, I discover that I personally witness to these tales. The fact that I might not believe in God or in some kind of divine spirit has not prevented me from facing with sympathy the complexity of their fate and modalities of their cultural appropriations. In fact, the language I speak, the phenomena I comment upon, and the stories I have chosen to share in these lectures on conversion are, indeed, not only unthinkable outside of a space circumscribed by African elements but also well determined by anthropology and the colonial saga, as well as the practices and missionising of Islam and Christianity. Thus, *Tales of Faith* is about any post-colonial individual.' (Mudimbe 1997: 198)

The study of Central African religion has for decades been my own main contribution to African studies. I will therefore eventually link up the discussion of Mudimbe's work with my own, towards the end of this Chapter. I will concentrate on *Tales of Faith*, but connecting as much as possible to the rest of Mudimbe's work, and to his person, to the extent this transpires in the published texts. I will be very critical, not out of lack of respect and admiration, but because the fundamental issues of Africa and of African studies today manifest themselves around Mudimbe as a central and emblematic figure, and we need to bring out those issues. After discussing Mudimbe's surprising methods I shall pinpoint what *Tales of Faith* is about (the adventure of clerical intellectualism in Central Africa during the twentieth century CE), what metacontents it contains (homelessness as Mudimbe's central predicament), and what all this means for the practice and the study of African historic religion,<sup>487</sup> the unin-

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<sup>485</sup> Unfortunately, I have not yet been able to consult his explicitly autobiographical book: Mudimbe 1994b.

<sup>486</sup> *Tales of Faith* was originally delivered as a series of lectures, the Louis H. Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion, at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1993.

<sup>487</sup> I prefer the expression 'African historic religion' to alternatives such as 'African traditional

vited guest of *Tales of Faith* and of Mudimbe's work in general. This gives me the opportunity to articulate and substantiate what I have wanted to say about Mudimbe's work for a long time. I will indeed take the opportunity of comparing his itinerary with my own, and our two paths will turn out to have been amazingly parallel even if they appear to have ended in opposite destinations.

## 12.2. Mudimbe's method in *Tales of Faith*

'These lectures are presented as stories of faith and adventure in intercultural problematics, created by the expansion of Christianity to Africa. (...) From the outset I like to make it clear that I am concerned with how representations of religious systems bind, fuse or oppose each other in synthetic discourses which, at a different level, might transmute into metadiscourses, such as those represented by histories of Christianity and Islam.' (Mudimbe 1997: ix)

When we try to pinpoint the method by which Mudimbe constructs his texts, the first thing that meets the eye is that his method is kaleidoscopic and eclectic. In *Tales of Faith*, his approach is alternately

- definitional (especially the first chapter, where he seeks to define religion).
- autobiographical (*passim*, and especially parts of his Chapter 2, where he most convincingly evokes and clarifies the micropolitics of Central African education for the priesthood in the middle of the twentieth century CE by reference to his own trajectory through this education (Mudimbe 1997: 50-55); micropolitics is here taken in the Foucaultian sense of the instilling, in individual minds through the construction and manipulation of small-scale interaction situations, of the preconditions for submission to, or for the hegemony of, a macro-level system of domination, such as (in this case) the colonial state and the Roman Catholic Church (Foucault 1975).
- exercises in the field of the history of ideas (especially in his second and third chapter, where he explains the processes through which, in Africa-based ethnotheology and philosophy during the twentieth century CE, the liberation of difference was effected within the seedbed of missionary Roman Catholicism.

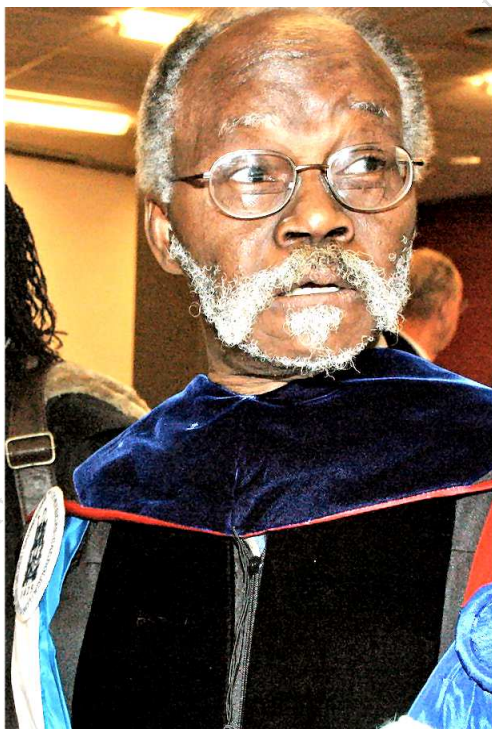
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religion' or 'African religion' tout court, in order to denote forms of religious expression which existed on the African continent more or less independently from, and often prior to, the penetration of such world religions as Islam and Christianity, and which have persisted in changed but recognisable form into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries CE, when many of these forms were drawn into the orbit of professional outsider description. The word 'traditional' has been used in so many ideologically charged contexts as to have become meaningless; and in some regions of Africa Islam and Christianity have ranked (although this fact is often overlooked) *among the religious forms of Africa ever since the first century of the respective existence of either world religion.*



- critical, albeit only in the narrowly described manner of the book review neatly summarising, situating and appraising one or more specific items of academic or literary production within the limited space and with the limited ambitions of a published book review.
- deliberately and explicitly hagiographic, in his treatment of Ishaku Jean and of Alexis Kagame.
- philosophical, when he seeks to articulate difference, identity, knowledge and representation in the context of his Central African historical narrative.

It is important to realise what this methodological strategy positively amounts to, and what it does not comprise.



*Fig. 12.1. Valentin Mudimbe (2008).*

In the first place I must make one general point which I will re-elaborate throughout this Chapter. The kaleidoscopic effect of the intertwined use of

various genres, the frequent lapses into autobiographical reminiscence, the fact that his book is more of a heterogeneous (and hasty!)<sup>488</sup> collage than a sustained argument, has a deeper significance, especially since as a literature scholar Mudimbe knows full well what he is doing. What these stylistic and compositional techniques convey is the fact that he resigns himself to his incapability of resolving the contradictions of his situation, and that instead he mediates these contradictions in a fairly unprocessed form to his readers. Below we shall see that this resignation at incomplete consistency does mark *Tales of Faith* as primarily a literary collage, whose constituent elements happen to look like fragments of state-of-the-art scholarship. In fact Mudimbe is, and expresses, the contradictions between and within the constituent elements of his tale, and he is the *homelessness* (without explicit Buddhist overtones; cf. Lehmann 1980: s.v. *Hauslosigkeit*) which the heterogeneity of their genres suggests. At a function organised on the occasion of his delivering the Jordan lectures in 1993 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, he solemnly passed around his United Nations passport for the stateless, as if this constituted his main or only existential and academic credentials.<sup>489</sup>

The 'critical' or rather 'book-review' method prevails to such an extent that *Tales of Faith* often reads as a barely disguised concatenation of individual book reviews written for separate publication. Sometimes the transitions from one pasted-in review to another are very abrupt (e.g. Mudimbe 1997: 47). At times the author cannot help himself and inadvertently inserts into his text (in other words, forgot to delete) the typical phrases peculiar to this genre, such as 'the book under review' (Mudimbe 1997: 97), even where in the book's text not the slightest indication has been given that at the point

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<sup>488</sup> Apart from the use of unintegrated scraps of book reviews (see below), the book's level of copy-editing is remarkably low. The spelling of proper names in Mudimbe's work is often defective; e.g. Blummebach, p. 150, and Blumenback, p. 188, for Blumenbach; Blumenbach's contemporary Heeren read Heeren (Mudimbe 1992b: 119); Barret, read Barrett (Barrett 1968) (Mudimbe 1997: 74); Livingston, read Livingstone (Mudimbe 1997: 44) – p. 188 has it correctly; Al-Hij Umar, read Al-Hajj 'Umar, (Mudimbe 1997: 90 and index – if he has the transliteration *jihād* whereas that *-i-* is usually not explicitly represented in written Arabic (جِهَاد), then he should also have the common transliteration *Hajj* where the same is true for the *-a-*: حَجَّ). It is not only the copy-editing of *Tales of Faith* which is surprisingly defective. Also the bibliography shows major lacunae. The entire, massive oeuvre of Kagame is cited in the text (Mudimbe 1997: 139-141) without even a single entry in the end bibliography. And a Tempels publication of 1959 is quoted without appearing the bibliography (Mudimbe 1997: 155); probably this is simply the English translation of *Bantoe-filosofie*, so for 1959 read 1979; Sally Falk Moore's 1984 book is mentioned in the text but not listed in the bibliography. Fortes & Dieterlen (1965), *African Systems of Thought*, is listed as edited only by Dieterlen, yet on page 161 a reference to 'Fortes 1965' appears which can only be that book; a very important quote is derived from a 1978 article by Mveng which does not appear in Mudimbe's bibliography (Mudimbe 1997: 173). One may well find such criticism of the works of a great mind petty, and I do agree wholeheartedly; but if Afrocentrists are to be chided (also by Mudimbe) for their unmistakably defective scholarship, why not insist that a tenured famous professor with all imaginable institutional facilities at his fingertips, should do better?

<sup>489</sup> Personal communication, Richard Fardon, Graham Furniss, and Louis Brenner, London, 1st February, 2001.

reached in Mudimbe's argument so far, we are proceeding to the discussion of a specific text, and *which* text. The disadvantages of the 'book review' method are clear. The original reviews largely retain their format, contents, and lengths, regardless of the differences in importance and in specific contribution of each of the books within the author's new book as a whole. Moreover, each review is to a considerable extent determined by the specific argument and conceptual apparatus as employed by the author of the specific book under review, and hence a concatenation of such reviews tends to display a higher level of disparity and a lower level of sustained discursive unity than one would expect from an author of Mudimbe's intercontinental reputation.

The insistence on the 'book-review method' suggests how Mudimbe identifies himself in his authorial practice. The effect of this method is the avoidance of a systematic conceptual framework, the avoidance of faithful submission to any established academic discipline except the discipline of literary studies, whence Mudimbe seems to derive, as the main model of his intellectual products, the virtually unbounded conventions of the 'essay', with its generous allowance (ever since the emergence of the essay as a genre in eighteenth century CE Great-Britain) of conceptual freedom, literary originality, and limited or non-existent *empirical* expectations or requirements. Not for nothing is Mudimbe a professor of French, Comparative Literature and Classics at Stanford University. Mudimbe is aware of the literary status of his argument as, more or less, *fiction*:

'Finally, my presentation of *Tales of Faith* might be judged too controversial, aggravated by the weight of theoretical preoccupations. To this I would respond that what I am offering is *not sheer fiction* [ my italics - WvB ]; it can sustain critical examination and, more importantly, can and should be checked against empirical studies, above all the experiential authority of serious Africa scholars and ongoing objectivist researches in the field. Despite its avowed status as a representation interrogating already highly worked and stylized representations, both in spirit and method it is far removed from metanarratives concerned, say, with the history of histories of philosophy (e.g. Lucien Braun [ 1973 -WvB ]), the antihistory of histories of literature (e.g. Deconstruction and Cie),<sup>490</sup> or even - should I dare? - the possibility of a multivolume on 'anthropological

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<sup>490</sup> An oblique reference to Derrida's oeuvre, where the concept of deconstruction is pivotal. The eminently Derridean concept of *difference* is also one of Mudimbe's central concepts; his entire book can be said to be about the 'liberation of difference' (Mudimbe 1997: 110) in the context of missionary Roman Catholicism in Central Africa during the twentieth century CE. Yet apart from a passing mention (Mudimbe 1997: 190-191) on the deconstruction of the binary opposition in Derrida's critique of logocentricity (significantly so indirectly that not Derrida, but Rotman on Derrida is quoted by Mudimbe; Rotman 1993: 98), all possible references to Derrida are avoided, probably merely because both are prominent francophone / America-directed writers, and Mudimbe wishes to avoid stating the obvious. Yet it remains remarkable that in his explication (Mudimbe 1997: 21 f.; based on Dumézil's reading of ancient Roman myth and rites; Dumézil 1980: 108) of why the day should begin at midnight and not at dawn, the notion of 'an absence which is also a presence' (as embodied in midnight conceived as the beginning instead of the opposite of the day), the obvious implied reference to Derrida is not made explicit. And when

theories and Africa', as Sally Falk Moore menaces in the foreword to her stimulating *Anthropology and Africa* (1994)<sup>491</sup> (Mudimbe 1997: xi-xii).

On the negative side, this self-definition also means that Mudimbe considers himself to be at liberty not to identify with any of the conceptual or methodological canons of any of the academic disciplines which might reasonably be taken to touch upon his project in this book. We shall come back to the disciplines below. Often Mudimbe chooses to observe a pristine definitional and conceptual originality which, to non-Foucaultians like myself, risks to appear pedantic.

In the beginning of *Tales*, Mudimbe tells us what the book is emphatically not:

'I do not intend a disciplinary monograph that would actualize faithfully some prescriptions entertained validly or otherwise by a scholastic coterie.' (Mudimbe 1997: ix)

In this sarcastic intention of counter-paradigmatic total originality, he succeeds. He writes on religion, but rather than adopting any of the current definitions of religion from late twentieth-century CE religious studies, religious anthropology, theology or philosophy of religion, as a classicist he reverts back to a Latin etymology of the word 'religion' borrowed from the authoritative Indo-Europeanist Benveniste – who, as we have seen in Chapter 6, above, is also Derrida's favourite linguistic source.<sup>492</sup> Likewise, Mudimbe uses the word 'politics' in the title of his book, but again the concept of politics is not taken in any of the more established senses canonised by late twentieth-century CE academic usage in the social and political sciences, history, political anthropology etc., but in an original etymological sense of 'commenting on the polis', the Greek city-state – again, the classicist, the philologist, is allowed to take precedence over any of the expectations with which the unprepared, especially the Africanist, reader may approach Mudimbe's text:

'politics in the etymological sense of the word (...) That is (...) comments on the polis as city and locus of the analyst's culture.' (Mudimbe 1997: 15)

In other words, Mudimbe appears to be saying here that the study of other religions is essentially self-reflection on and by the society to which the researcher belongs, and hence part of a North Atlantic project of ethnocentrism and hegemony. Another definition which Mudimbe gives of the political is scarcely more encouraging for empirical researchers of politics in Africa:

'Any conciliation between a represented and its representation is a matter of perma-

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Mudimbe wishes to criticise Western absolute dualism, it is his own sometime senior colleague at Paris-Nanterre, Lévi-Strauss (cf. Mudimbe 1991a: ix, and for a discussion on Lévi-Strauss and Sartre pp. xi f.) who was to be cited as the authority leading out of the impasse (most remarkably, in view of Lévi-Strauss' emphatic reliance on binary oppositions), rather than Derrida, whose seminal critique of binary oppositions decisively marks the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism.

<sup>491</sup> Moore 1994; repeatedly mentioned in *Tales of Faith* (Mudimbe 1997: e.g. xii, 27 f.), but – as remarked above – not listed in that book's bibliography.

<sup>492</sup> Benveniste 1973; incidentally, exactly the same passage from the same author features in Derrida's major piece on religion, in Derrida & Vattimo 1996.

ment negotiations. These presentations are political in nature, insofar as they operate as metaphors of something else, existing out there in a sociohistorical context.' (Mudimbe 1997: 200)

After this follows the example of Conrad's sophisticated play on colours in *The Heart of Darkness* (1899 / 1971), which while not devoid of all political implications, in the eyes of a political scientist or political anthropologist can hardly count as a convincing let alone exhaustive evocation of the political domain.

As a result of all these departures from common expectation among Africanists, *Tales of Faith* is scarcely about 'religion and politics in Central Africa' as many empirical Africanists would expect it to be. There is hardly any discussion here of the way in which the political as an institutional sphere linking local and regional processes of power and performance to the national state and to intercontinental power relations, takes a religious guise or is informed by religious phenomena, however defined. Such major popular responses in the religious history of Central Africa as: Kongo religion, cults of affliction in the field of diagnosis and healing, witchcraft eradication movements, Watchtower, Kimbanguism, the emigration of the defeated Lumpa church from Zambia to Congo, the close alliance between church and state under the Mobutu regime, the selective caricatural virtualisation of African historic culture in the context of Mobutu's *politique d'authenticité*, the emergence of local Independent Churches and mass movements such as *Le Combat Spirituel* (see below) which specifically address the effects of colonial intellectual and spiritual alienation in a framework that has departed very widely from missionary Roman Catholicism and from the existential and signifying predicaments of Roman Catholics priests as an intellectual elite – all these and many other themes are surprisingly and shockingly absent from this book.

Reading this book, it was as if I suddenly found myself in a totally different part of the African continent from that on which I have concentrated – notably in the religious domain – my historical and anthropological research for the past thirty years. 'Religion and politics in Central Africa...' that is Lemarchand, John Janzen and Johannes Fabian, Bogumil Jewsiewiecki and René Devisch, Filip de Boeck, Verhaegen, de Craemer, Jan Vansina, Luc de Heusch, Vellut, Wyatt MacGaffey, A.F. Roberts, Danielle de Lame, but presumably also (if one takes Central Africa slightly larger than just Congo) James Fernandez, Shepperson & Price, Inus Daneel, Terence Ranger, Taylor & Lehmann, Victor Turner, Matthijs Schoffeleers, Wim van Binsbergen, to mention only a few...<sup>493</sup> Some of these authors do feature in Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith*. Yet by and large one gets the

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<sup>493</sup> So here again we hit upon an example of the phenomenon, discussed in the Introduction to the present book, that authors in the humanities including philosophers do not feel obliged to acknowledge and heed the accumulated state-of-the-art empirical studies on their topic, but instead tend to develop their own approach, and their own description of the topic at hand. With such a preposterous conception of scholarship, most painstaking empirical work on, for instance, Central African religious change might well have remained unwritten. I cannot think of any serious conception of scholarship where such omissions would pass without dismissive comment.

impression of such intellectual isolationism and idiosyncrasy, that for instance an admittedly excellent book published in 1994 by the French historian of Africa Bernard Salvaing is praised by Mudimbe for doing, as a methodological innovation, precisely the things that were already standard historiographic procedure for Ranger and his School in the 1970s.<sup>494</sup> Mudimbe's approach is too narrowly confined to Congo and to Roman Catholicism. The excursions into parallel processes in the Islamic domain are too short to be more than perfunctory. Closer attention to varieties of Protestantism in Congo and Central Africa in general (now mainly touched on in the puzzlingly hagiographic section on Ishaku Jean) would have shown that the splendid *liberation of African difference* in the context of missionary Christianity in this region from the late nineteenth century CE onward did not exclusively take the road of Roman Catholic clerical intellectualism, and was not confined to textual polemics over ideology and dogma but also, and frequently, extended into open struggles over organisational and financial control (the context for thousands of fissions leading to the proliferation of Independent Churches typical of Central and Southern Africa in the twentieth century CE), to open armed confrontations like in the cases of the Chilembwe uprising and of the Lumpa Church, to secular contestations towards territorial independence, and to a whole range of religious expressions (propheticism, witchcraft eradication, healing cults, and the broad syncretistic periphery of African Independent Christian Churches) in which historic African religion was highly visible and, far from being denied and suppressed, engaged with Christian elements of doctrine, ritual and organisation on a far more equal footing.<sup>495</sup>

The fresh outlook with which Mudimbe approaches the field occasionally makes him bump his head against an open door. The overt dialogue between missionary Christianity and African historic religion is as old as David Livingstone's famous exchange with the 'witchdoctor' during one of his travels up North, into South Central Africa (Livingstone 1858 / 1971; Kuper 1979). It is only against the background of this ready model that Michael Kirwen, a century later,

'converses with a diviner / witchdoctor on such subjects as the idea of God, the source of evil, divination', etc. (Mudimbe 1997: 83)

Mudimbe misses this intertextual reference to the most famous Protestant exponent of and writer on 'the expansion of Christianity to Africa' (Mudimbe 1997: ix), which shows him to have been parochially eclectic in his reading when preparing for *Tales of Faith*. Mudimbe's fixation on one particular ideological transmutation process which happened to be part of his own biography is so strong that he fails to identify the collective representations proper to other African responses to Christianity, for instance when Ela lets slip into his text one of the most cherished clichés circulating in popular African anti-

<sup>494</sup> Salvaing 1994; Ranger & Kimambo 1972; Ranger & Weller 1975: 42-47.

<sup>495</sup> Cf. Shepperson & Price 1958; van Binsbergen 1981; Fields 1985.

colonial protest:

When Christianity was implanted in Africa, something important happened at the same time: while the converts were distracted by the Bible thrust into their hands, their land was stripped from them (Mudimbe 1997: 83; cf. Ela 1989: 147).

Contrary to what Mudimbe suggests, this is not just Ela speaking; this is Ela lazily adopting an expression (a *cliché*!) which in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century CE could be heard all over Africa from the Cape to Kenya and Dakar.

A subtitle like 'religion as political performance' makes the uninitiated reader expect a discussion of a wide range of religious contexts in which political performance may be detected and subjected to exegesis: not just the struggles of Christian (more specifically Roman Catholic) and post-Christian African intellectuals, but also those of the millions of non-intellectual adherents of the same Christian denomination. I shall come back to this point towards the end of this Chapter. And if the explicit aim of the book is to present

'stories of faith and adventure in intercultural problematics created by the expansion of Christianity in Africa' (Mudimbe 1997: ix),

one can hardly entertain (like Mudimbe seems to do) the illusion that such an expansion took place in a context where religious alternatives to Christianity were entirely absent, muted, insignificant, or too insufficiently documented to deserve explicit discussion. Territorial or ecological cults, royal cults, professional cults of hunters and blacksmiths, ancestral cults, diagnostic and therapeutic cults of affliction, prophetism, sorcery beliefs and sorcery eradication movements, and to top it all the expansion of Swahili-related Islam towards the continent's interior (cf. van Binsbergen 1981) – the very texture of nineteenth and early twentieth century CE socio-cultural life in Central Africa was saturated with non-Christian religion, and one cannot simply take for granted (as Mudimbe through his silence on these issues appears to do) that the prospective clerics who entered the study for the Roman Catholic priesthood, did so without the slightest exposure to, or knowledge of, these alternatives, and were completely indifferent about them.

Let me add that *Tales of Faith*, one of Mudimbe's more recent books, is extreme in this respect. Elsewhere he did touch on aspects of historic African religion, e.g. prophetism,<sup>496</sup> creation myths, and everyday African life in *Parables and Fables*,<sup>497</sup> whereas

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<sup>496</sup> Early eighteenth-century CE Christian Kongo prophets, and twentieth-century Christian prophets in Southern Africa, are discussed briefly in *Tales of Faith* (Mudimbe 1997: 71f.).

<sup>497</sup> Cf. Mudimbe 1991a. Especially in his discussion of the Luba genesis myth Mudimbe poses as one who, while not an anthropologist, has rubbed shoulders with anthropologists and moreover lays claim to a relevant lived experience apparently considered by him as the equivalent of anthropological field-work as a source of ethnographic authority:

'One may ask: Whence comes this authority [ to speak on aspects of Luba or Songye culture in anthropological terms ] . (...) My answer will be simple. It is true that I am not an anthropologist and do not claim to be one. I spent at least ten years of my life studying ancient Greek and Latin

sorcery constitutes the topic of the important book by the Congolese anthropologist Buakasa entitled *L'Impensé du Discours* (1973), which Mudimbe discusses in a short chapter of his *L'Odeur du Père* (Mudimbe 1982: 144-155).

It soon transpires that the 'political' 'performances' Mudimbe has in mind, are merely instances of selected authors' textual self-presentation – as if the production of written texts is the only political performance humans are capable of, and the most compelling manifestations of religion to boot. A European medieval theologian, a West African Islamic saintly writer, and the first Roman Catholic priest from Central Africa are paraded to demonstrate that they

'connect the practice of their lives to a belief, and their narratives are in reality performances referring to an external 'something': an incredible transcending everyday practice and its obvious rationality, a Word signifying both revelation and salvation. Thus, the body of the text by Saint Anselm, Cerno Bokar or Kaoze does not seem to belong to the text itself but to this something that is both its embodiment and justification' (Mudimbe 1997: 5).

If, at least in *Tales of Faith*, Mudimbe does not explicitly and unequivocally choose a constituency in Africa among the African masses and their cultural, political and religious expressions, neither does he consistently and compellingly choose a disciplinary constituency in North Atlantic academic life, enjoying the lack of methodological and theoretical rigour which the literary form of the kaleidoscopic, collage-like essay accords him. He has repeatedly investigated the status of disciplines in the context of African Studies (Bates, Mudimbe & O'Barr 1993: 160 *f.*), and affirms rightly and not very originally that in that context of regional studies their boundaries have faded away.

Let us consider Mudimbe's philosophical excursions in a disciplinary light. Mudimbe is a linguist by training, holder of a Louvain doctorate on the semantics of the word 'air', widespread in West-European languages yet without clear Indo-European etymology.<sup>498</sup> Although philosophical references abound in the

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for an average of twelve hours each week, with more than that amount of time devoted to French and European cultures, before being eligible for a doctorate in comparative philology (Greek, Latin, and French) at Louvain University. *I do not know many anthropologists who could publicly demonstrate a similar experience about their speciality in order to found their authority in African studies.* (...) My experience would define itself somewhere between the practice of philosophy with its possible intercultural applications and the sociocultural and intersubjective space which made me possible: my Luba-Lulua mother, my Songye father, the Swahili cultural context of my primary education in Katanga (Shaba), the Sanga milieu of my secondary education from 1952 to 1959 in Kakanda, near Jadotville (Likasi), and, later on, at the Catholic seminary of Mweru, near what was then Elisabethville [ now Lubumbashi – WvB ], and my brief sojourn in a Benedictine monastery in Rwanda' (Mudimbe 1991a: 124-125; my italics).

It remains unclear how such a laudably disciplined life devoted to North Atlantic linguistic and intellectual subjects, could qualify, as Mudimbe suggests, as an honorary degree in African ethnography? And, being a qualified (*cf.* note 237, above) Africanist anthropologist myself, I know of hundreds of colleagues whose time input into their expertise has far exceeded Mudimbe's claimed input in his.

<sup>498</sup> Mudimbe 1979; Chantraine 1968-1980; Partridge 1979: 10 *f.*; Pokorny 1959-1969. Meillet 1925 claims (*sed non vidi*) that Greek *aēr* < \**awer* means 'suspension'. There is some indirect support for this claim in Empedocles' doxology, if we interpret the Greek goddess Hera, there, as the ele-



bibliography to his PhD thesis and in all his other academic books, and although Mudimbe is generally perceived as a philosopher, Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith* is primarily not a philosophical text. True enough, it discusses in some of its chapters the work of specific African philosophers, and in other passages makes brief reference to such philosophers as Aristotle, Cicero, de Certeau,<sup>499</sup> Foucault, Heidegger, Sartre, Husserl; and to social scientists working on the borderline with philosophy, such as Bourdieu and Lévi-Strauss. Mudimbe starts sowing a field whose preparation he does not bother to explain to the uninitiated reader. Key concepts such as 'difference' and 'discourse' are used practically without any formal conceptual discussion; African theologians' methods such as 'retrodition' are clearly introduced, admittedly, but as the thought strategies of others, not of Mudimbe himself. The book is perhaps a philosophically-inspired essay in the History of Ideas, but not a straightforward contribution to philosophy as such.

There is no denial that in recent decades, African Studies have been greatly enriched by Mudimbe's statements on the interdisciplinary nature of that field of research (Mudimbe 1997: 164), on identity and otherness, and especially on the Colonial Library, which he defines as:

'(...) the scientific knowledge gathered, organized and classified by the pre-colonial and the colonial experiences. It became part of African universities, which were almost all instituted between 1950 and 1960. The drive, project and organization of these institutions were European at the heart of all subject matters, foundational principles and aims' (Mudimbe 1997: 173 f.).

'Thus, the colonial library, in its contents as well as in its significance, generalizes a conceptual rule, a historical paradigm, and a political project' (Mudimbe 1997: 96).

*Tales of Faith's* departure from a disciplinary philosophical framework is already clear from the fact that Mudimbe can be seen to constantly and eclectically shift philosophical positions without making these shifts explicit:

- posing as a Foucaultian yet holding forth today's North Atlantic science and scholarship as capable of offering an absolute outside position, a raised pedestal from which to objectively contemplate non-Western forms of knowledge – hence Mudimbe's great disappoint-

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ment 'air' (which is plausible but contested, cf. extensive discussion and references in van Binsbergen 2012d: 158 f.). At one stage, Hera was suspended in shackles between Heaven and Earth (Graves 1964: 54, identifying the following sources: *Scholiast* on Homer's *Ilias* XXI, 444; Tzetzes' *Commentarii in Lycophrontis Alexandram*, 34; Homer, *Ilias* I, 399 f. and XV, 18 f.). Personally, I favour a Kartvelian (Georgian / Colchian) etymology for the name Hera, \*čwēr-, 'to sink (also of the sun)', Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008, 'Kartvelian etymology'. This Kartvelian word is semantically akin not only to 'suspension' but also close to Hera as the mythical adversary (as setting sun?) of protagonists situated in the Georgian / Colchian context and having strong solar connotations (Aëtes, Medeia, Pelias – as rising or midday sun?). Also see my remarks on the possibly Austric i.e. South East Asian origin of *air* in the same footnote 237.

<sup>499</sup> Cf. de Certeau 1984; de Certeau 1986; de Vries 1992: 441-477; de Certeau 1988. *Tales of Faith* is dedicated to the memory of de Certeau; as well as to that of Mveng, the theologian and historian of art (cf. Mveng 1965) who will appear below as one of Mudimbe's heroes of the latter's saga of clerical intellectualism in Central Africa.

ment when Sandra Harding's book on *The Racial Economy of Science*<sup>500</sup> brings out the racialist boundary conditions of modern science;

- describing the Foucaultian micropolitics of his own missionary education in Bourdieuan rather than Foucaultian terms;
- situating 'difference' in a Lévi-Straussian rather than a Derridean context, and hence ignoring the post-structuralist, post-modern critique of identity as a desperate reconstruction of an essentially discredited concept of the subject, instead as a Sartrian and Heideggerian celebration of the subject.
- Neither is *Tales of Faith* an obvious contribution to the history or sociology of ideas, or to African religious studies, manifestly following the standards of those disciplines. Mudimbe appears to be doing intellectual history, but merely on the basis of a selection of authors' published books, without wasting time over the empirically grounded construction of the sociological and historical background, context, major historiographic debates, and points of method. The discovery of oral sources for African history, which he erroneously attributes solely to Vansina,<sup>501</sup> is applauded by him as a form of re-rodiction (see below); but the subsequent debate on the limitations and the potential of oral history, which has raged on until today, appears to have been lost on Mudimbe – his intellectual historiography has to do without interviews and without personal recollections other than his own. In Mudimbe's hands, intellectual history can certainly do without archival study, not only of documents produced by the colonial and post-colonial state and the former motherlands, but also of documents produced within the formal organisations (the Roman Catholic Church and its missionary and educational in-

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<sup>500</sup> Harding, 1993; cf. Mudimbe 1997: 187 f. In Mudimbe's discussion of Sandra Harding's work, he has to admit that, given the racial dimensions of the production of science in the contemporary world (the exclusion of certain paradigms and certain people, and the privileging of others, on racialist grounds), the pretended universalism of science is not a reality. But this apparently also comes as a great disappointment to him, which makes *The Racial Economy of Science* 'one of the most distressing books I have ever read' (Mudimbe 1997: 197). Little wonder: it explodes the universalist utopia in which he has retreated, as a post-clerical post-African global intellectual – for as a Black person he is reminded that even here he represents 'the paradoxical absolute and relative sign of difference' (Mudimbe 1997: 191).

<sup>501</sup> Vansina 1961. In the same year 1961 that Vansina's seminal book was published, the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute at Lusaka, Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, started a series of Central Bantu Historical Texts (Apthorpe 1961; Cunnison 1968). Vansina's next book *Kingdoms of the Savanna* (1966) would for many years remain the bible of precolonial historiography in Central Africa. He could base his synthesis on a large amount of oral historical work already conducted in previous decades, mainly by others than himself.

stitutions; the university and publishing houses) within which the intellectual struggles took place which Mudimbe's book seeks to capture and explain. The essay requires no rigorous empirical backing – nor does it receive any, in this case, even though Mudimbe asserts that such a backing might have been given. As he admits, *Tales of Faith* is

'a representation interrogating already highly worked and styled representations' (Mudimbe 1997: xii),

a book largely based on other books.

Neither is *Tales of Faith* an obvious contribution to the sociology of knowledge. It is striking that Mudimbe does not have a sociological frame of interpretation to speak of. This was already the reproach by Willame in his 1974 review of Mudimbe's *L'Autre Face du Royaume*.<sup>502</sup>

'Nulle part, on ne trouve dans l'ouvrage une analyse de cette formation sociale qu'est le Zaïre.' [= Congo]

Tellingly, Mudimbe answered, tongue in cheek, not by offering the sociological analysis that was justifiably requested, but by somewhat demagogically summarising his critique of colonial science,

'which deprives young Zairois of a possible revolution' (Mudimbe 1982: 199).

Surprisingly and irritatingly, Mudimbe's main tools to interpret empirical social situations, their contradictions, and their evolution over time, are not in the least sociological, but literary and philological analysis, and psychoanalysis, to which he was introduced in the time that Parisian intellectual life was under the spell of Jacques Lacan's famous seminar. Hence Mudimbe tends to reduce religion to 'tales', fables', etc., and to reduce social conflict and transformation to an individual scenario of desire, death wish and suppression; as a result, collectivities, group processes, and their sociological determinants (status, reference group behaviour, class, legitimation, power, mobilisation) remain invisible. Also in this respect he shows himself the man of letters, the literature scholar, propounding a conception of humankind which, despite all the trappings of a modern philosophical idiom to which Foucault, Heidegger and Husserl made major contributions, largely repeats the individual-centredness of nineteenth-century CE intellectual and literary thought.<sup>503</sup> It is (even more so than the pioneer historiographies by Herodotus and Thucydides) a scenario of heroes (cf. Homer, Hesiod, Apollodorus), not of social structures, their contradictions, and their dynamics. Thus, when Mudimbe quotes Mveng,

'The West agrees with us today that the way to truth passes by numerous paths, other than Aristotelian, Thomistic logic or Hegelian dialectics. But social and human sciences themselves must be decolonized' (Mudimbe 1997: 172; regrettably, Mudimbe's Mveng

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<sup>502</sup> Willame 1974. Mudimbe (1982) replies at length to Willame's criticism in *L'Odeur du Père* (Mudimbe 1982), in a concluding chapter entitled 'Quel meurtre du père?' ['Which parricide?'] (1982: 197-203).

<sup>503</sup> Thus Mudimbe is a significant manifestation of the tendencies I chide in my Introduction, above: empirically and bibliographically blinkered do-it-yourself amateur approaches to social-science problematics.

quote is not adequately referenced in his book and cannot be made more specific here)

then this is interpreted as the expression of a violence whose roots can only be explained, Mudimbe suggests, by a Freudian theory of anxiety, and not by the politics and the sociology of mobilisation and contestation. Mudimbe situates Mveng uniquely within a scenario where clerical intellectualism is developing an order of succession to replace the Colonial Library. And implicitly this is an Oedipal situation, with real or fantasised parricide as the most effective means of succession. It is the central scenario of the *Golden Bough* (succession by killing the previous high-priest; Frazer 1911-1915 / 1890-1915)<sup>504</sup> reduced to a personal drama, and projected onto the present.

Provisionally, before even examining what *Tales of Faith* is about according to its author (Central African clerical intellectualism), and what my close reading suggests that it is really about (Mudimbe's homelessness in the face of death), the above discussion of his method and his making light with any disciplinary canon and method allows us to define what I would call *the poetics of Mudimbe's writing* in this book. The book is composed of many heterogeneous small parts, which collage-fashion are only loosely connected, and many of which in their internal structure and conception are not manifestly consistent with any disciplinary canon of scholarship. These parts could be considered modules, most of which appear in the trappings of philosophical or empirical historical argument (others are autobiographical or hagiographical). What integrates them is not a sustained academic argument on African philosophy or the history of ideas, but a highly personal narrative of defining the author's personal identity and itinerary. The modules are like the paragraphs in an experimental novel and even more like the lines and stanzas in a poem. *Tales of Faith*, therefore, is primarily a literary product to be judged by literary standards;<sup>505</sup> *its artistic originality consist in the fact that it rather effectively, and deceptively, manages to conceal its literary building bricks as pieces of consistent scholarly argument*. This also explains the moving and revelatory effect which the text of *Tales of Faith* has on the reader, at an existential level, prodding the reader to examine her or his own identity and life at the same earnest level of historical self-definition, loss, and hope – like I will do for myself towards the end of my argument. The book testifies to a great creative and scholarly mind who can afford to play with the canons of scholarship, first of all because his qualifica-

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<sup>504</sup> Of course, I realise, with some regret and embarrassment, that – in my relentless pursuit of truth and method – the same scenario applies to me as the author of the present Chapter; and as someone who, at the end of his long and in some ways fruitful career, was a candidate to be a victim of parricide himself – as set out in the Introduction, above.

<sup>505</sup> From a post-modern perspective, the same could be said, rightly or wrongly, and has been said, of any product of historiography or the social sciences; but even if such a post-modern perspective would be applied consistently, there would be a marked difference between such products with their commitment to some kind of intersubjective professional method and theory, and Mudimbe's entirely idiosyncratic approach by which literary aims are achieved by the semblance of academic means.

tions in this field are incontestable, secondly and more importantly because to him these canons are merely effective stepping-stones – the Wittgensteinian ladder (1964: 6.54) he may cast away after climbing up –, leading towards something even more valuable: *the articulation of identity and personal struggle in the face of death and homelessness – expressing the culturally transmuted person that he is, that many African today are, that in the last analysis all human beings are, and thus expressing the human condition in a unique yet recognisable and identifiable way.*

### **12.3. What Tales of Faith is really about (1): The narrative of clerical intellectualism in Central Africa**

Mudimbe situates himself in a process of conversion which begins, two or three generations before his, with adherents to African historic religious forms dwelling in some Central African village or royal court environment, and which concludes with him and his fellow clerical or post-clerical intellectuals. In the latter's experience African historic religion has become completely eradicated. Instead they have gone through Roman Catholicism or other Christian denominations, either remaining there or proceeding to agnostic, atheistic, materialist *etc.* positions. In the process of affirming their difference in the political context of missionary Christianity, they have ended up in full command of globally circulating universalising skills and qualifications: ideally fluent in several Indo-European languages as well as in several African ones; writing poetry, novels, and philosophical and historical treatises; operating libraries, computers, the Internet, academic committees, and publishing resources. Thus they have reached a vantage point from which, as intellectual producers, they both serve, and critique at the same time, the power-knowledge structure of North Atlantic hegemony, using Africa as an exemplary reference point in the process.

Here *retrodition* appears as a major technique:

'In both moments of negation, as illustrated by Kagame and Mulago, as well as by most ethnotheological disciples of Placide Tempels, retrodition seems to be the main technique that establishes both the new right to speech (and the power of spatializing indigenous localities) and the intellectual efficiency of its interpretation). Retrodition – from Latin *retro* (on the back side, behind, in time back) and *dicere* (to speak) – denotes the idea of speaking (and thus synthesizing) from an illusory, invented moment back in time. In the process, the present invests its values in the past with its questions and hypotheses, and rediscovers in the invented, reorganized spaces, laws, paradigms, or the truth of its suppositions. Indeed, the new creation is often in contradiction with the colonial adapted Enlightenment paradigms and its library' (Mudimbe 1997: 95).

(...) by the 1950s retrodition was already a paradigm (...) Africans can read, interpret and reorganize traces of their own past in order to sum up the spirit of their own history or constitute the signs and modes of a religious revelation' (Mudimbe 1997: 119).

Mudimbe describes the situation of the exemplary African clerical intellectuals of an earlier generation, such as Mveng (1965), Kagame (1955 / 1956), Mulago

(1965), and Ki-Zerbo (1972), in terms of cultural *métissage*, let us say ‘the condition of being of mixed cultural descent’.

Mudimbe uses strong words indeed to characterise the process that brought about ‘mixed cultural descent’, and its results. Kagame is a *saint* for Mudimbe; the latter relates

‘how, in the name of Catholicity, the missionaries had imposed a foreign name, Mungu, as the appellation of God who, in Rwanda, was known for centuries by the name of Imana. As a priest, he had to accept this sacrilege that, from his knowledge of the Rwandan tradition, he knew was an extreme affront to the divinity and to his kin. But out of fidelity to his vocation and to Rome, he did submit. God alone knows [ this is a self-proclaimed agnostic scholar writing – WvB ] how he suffered until the day when the Church of his country reinstated the name of Imana, after rejecting the Mungu of the missionaries.’<sup>506</sup> With his death, Africa has lost not only a learned man but perhaps, and even more, a servant of Imana, and if Imana has a meaning, Alexis Kagame was, I presume, its luminous sign among us. May he remain so!’ (Mudimbe 1997: 144 f.)

Here, suddenly, there is no longer question of the representation of African historic culture as inherently problematic:

‘his [ Kagame’s ] extreme kindness (...) was a gift of the heart and understanding which, in certain circumstances, particularly when one attacked the milieu that he thought was the authentic expression of African culture, could be transformed into dreadfully violent fits of anger. When this happened, Alexis Kagame would abandon the art of parenthesis and detour to express his keen indignation, for example, to those young Westerners working abroad, in lieu of military service, whose brief stay in Africa succeeds in transfiguring into Africanists and in confirming their intellectual certainties’ (Mudimbe 1997: 142 f.).

Mudimbe’s extensive treatment of Kagame is cast in superlative terms, it is a downright hagiography, and Mudimbe’s use of that genre is deliberate. The same genre reappears in his extensive description, borrowed from Lamar Williamson (1992), of the Protestant minister Jean Ishaku: killed by Mulelists also known as Simbas (‘Lions’) in 1964 because during a raid on their mission station he could not be forced to verbally betray – like St Peter was to betray Jesus thrice before the cock crow<sup>507</sup> – his American fellow-missionary and former teacher.

<sup>506</sup> This sentence refers to an important conflict that has cropped up all over the world in many situations of missionary Christianity: a conflict over the proper translation of the name(s) of the Biblical God. Preaching and transmission of the Bible required such a translation from the very first day, when the missionaries’ language proficiency was still minimal, and they were still maximally dependent on interpreters (often not from the target community but from more or less adjacent language communities). Some of the absurdities to which this led are caricatured in *Song of Lawino* by the religious anthropologist and prominent literary writer Okot p’Bitek 1974.

<sup>507</sup> Cf. (after the edition by A. Mai, 1859):

Ἐφη ἀντὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦς· ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, ὅτι ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ νυκτὶ, πρὶν ἀλέκτορα φωνῆσαι, τρεῖς ἀπαρνήσει\* με.

Matthew 26:34: ‘Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.’

It is remarkable that in one and the same book Mudimbe should discuss the spread of Christianity in Africa, and the rise of a science of, for, and by, Africa. The implication is simply that the clerical intellectualism produced both Christian religious expressions, and African philosophy, and African social science, often by the same persons. Mudimbe addresses this question explicitly (1997: 174 *f.*) and once again his explanation (although clearly in the field of the sociology of knowledge) is devoid of any sociological dimension, but merely psychoanalytical, and death-related. Perhaps in this case we are closest to the essentially utopian solution which Mudimbe has taken for his own predicament, his relation to Africa and to the global domain of academia:

'In the invocation of Africanization policies, by insisting on its dream of self-sufficiency, I wanted somehow to interrogate indirectly a subjective project and its almost suicidal terms, by playing silently on a simple Lacanian tension that is represented in the difference between death-drive and being-towards-death. I mean, on the one hand, the apparent epistemological eccentricity of the African subject, such as a Mveng, Kagame, Mulago or Kizerbo [ *sic* ] who, in their projects, are divided between their ego and 'something' else – the real, symbolic and imaginary spaces of conflicting fields of sciences opposing their own articulation as historical subjects in an intellectual configuration. On the other hand, in their consciousness, the personal experience of a possible fragmentation in an *espace métisse*, as magnificently illustrated by Eboussi-Boulaga in *Christianity without Fetishes* (1981), might indicate signs and dangers for a complete collapse of individuation. Under such an interrogation, the best resoluteness leads to a rivalry of value systems or, at best, as witnessed by Mveng and Eboussi-Boulaga, to a desire projected in an unnameable future. One could thus refer to Lacan's *Ecrits*:

'Who, then, is the other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who agitates me' (Lacan 1977: 172; Mudimbe 1997: 175).

The prophets of the recent African cultural maturity – such as Kagame, Kizerbo [ *sic* ], Mulago or Mveng – stand as mediators between this level and that of confusing and confused disciplines of *African studies*, which attend to the adaptation and indigenization of supposedly universal paradigms of sciences and those of revealed religions of the letter. The truth that gives them the right to question the pertinence of such an immense claim is, paradoxically the same that define [ *sic* ] them as particular subject [ *sic* ] able to produce value and true or false statements, and to make himself or herself understood because of his or her submission to a normative and paradigmatic epistemological order and its intellectual and ethical procedures' (Mudimbe 1997: 181 *f.*).<sup>508</sup>

## **12.4. What Tales of Faith is really about (2) Homelessness as Mudimbe's central predicament**

### 12.4.1. Beyond the dream of an African home

Fascinated by the intellectual appropriations and contestations of Africa such as have constituted the topic of Mudimbe's writings (1988, 1994a), there are

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<sup>508</sup> There follows a long quotation from Foucault, predictably: Foucault 1971: 35 *f.*

significant topics which scarcely enter into Mudimbe's discourse, and if they do it is as things entirely remote from him, external to him, things which appear as chimerical, illusory, irrelevant, and without legitimate appeal: 'The African people', the formal political institutions which inform their lives and which are to some extent shaped and challenged by these people, the religious forms in which these people have expressed themselves in precolonial times and which have in part persisted since the advent of Christianity in the region. It is almost as if in *Tales of Faith* the politics of performance are reduced to Mudimbe's own essayistic performance of autobiography, concealed under the trappings of a chain of objectifying literature reports, philosophical intermezzi and other detached modules of scholarly production, following the autobiographical poetics which I identified above.

In *Tales of Faith* there is a tension, familiar from every (auto-)biography, between the subject's unique itinerary in time and space, and the extent to which these idiosyncratic details are yet representative for a much larger category of people, and for an entire period. Sometimes Mudimbe situates his predicament in the context of a structured collectivity and its shared representations, a culture:

'My sense of belonging to a group reflects a degree of my insertion into its culture, and what my death might signify when I am gone would be my ways of witnessing to the arbitrariness of my culture' (Mudimbe 1997: 199).

This is a surprising passage. For what Mudimbe claims as a culture is not at all one of the reified 'African ethnic or tribal cultures', freeze-dried and packaged within the Colonial Library. His only sense of belonging resides with what in the formative period of his life was only in the process of emerging as a minority expression of cultural contestation: Central African clerical intellectualism – to whose black dress code, repetitive daily routines (the breviary), and personal network he has continued to cling.<sup>509</sup> Yet he has a point precisely because the type of conversion at hand here can be argued to have become, ultimately, a major cultural expression in African life by the end of the twentieth century CE. However, Mudimbe himself does not present such an argument; sharing with the African masses is not exactly his predilection, in *Tales of Faith* – although such a motivation may have inspired his earlier works written in the 1970s.

On the contrary, in *Tales of Faith* Mudimbe chooses, for the description of his itinerary, a terminology that is so individual-centred that it primarily conveys a sense of uniqueness:

'*Tales of Faith* is about the strange constructed place I chose to inhabit so that I could think about the unthinkable: how well the predicament of Sartre's pessimism in "Hell is other people" meets the supreme beauty of "I am an Other". The two positions are

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<sup>509</sup> This is merely a statement of fact, truly without any intention at evaluation, let alone ridicule. If I myself take the liberty of donning a *sangoma* uniform and appearing, in that attire, in publications and at the Internet, who am I to chide a dear and brilliant colleague's similar (but with direction reversed) North-South bricolage of identity?



inseparable in this space, in which identities are always mixtures facing each other as competitive projects aimed as, to use Schlegel's language, an impossible *ars combinatoria*<sup>510</sup> – I mean a universal and definitive “logical chemistry” (Mudimbe 1997: 202).

This is the only real home Mudimbe may claim as his own. He certainly does not perceive Africa as such a home, and he perceives his Africanness as problematic:

‘In the beginning of these lectures, I intended to suggest a phenomenological description of religion as a political performance in theoretical and anthropological spaces, using L[é]vy-Bruhl's highly spatialized representations of effects from everyday life, as well as my own presentations of transcultural enterprises of conversion, adaptation and inculturation of Christianity. Now, this reflection is ending as a personal meditation on the being of a specific *métissage* between religious forms of experiences. Moreover, I should note that my meditation is grounded not only in my subjectivity but in a special locality of my experience in the world – in a Roman Catholic culture with its sensibility, which could account for my relative disinterest in African Islam. If my ‘Africanness’ [ sic ] designates a legacy and a project, indeed it also includes the *Tales of Faith* in all the possibilities of my becoming. Looking a last time at what Christianity and Islam signify, it is from the solidity of this *métissité* that I can marvel about what they still represent as intercultural challenges’ (Mudimbe 1997: 203).

Only once in *Tales of Faith* have I spotted a phrase in which Africa, contrary to Mudimbe's own and also Kwame Appiah's (1992) injunctions, was simply taken for granted: characteristically, in that passage, taken for granted not in relation to Mudimbe's own positioning, but when it is said of Alexis Kagame that he

‘made his devotion to Africa into a reality’. (Mudimbe 1997: 135 f.)

Although as much as anyone else aware of the unique complexities and potentialities of Africa as a situation,<sup>511</sup> Mudimbe is extremely concerned not to fall into the Afrocentrist trap which Stephen Howe caustically characterised as the construction of

‘mythical pasts and imagined homes’ (Howe 1999).

As a literature scholar Mudimbe is expertly at home in the realm of textual imagination (hence titles such as *Parables and Fables*, and *Tales of Faith*, for books in which he analyses crucial aspects of the twentieth-century CE experience in Central Africa), but he considers it his task to deconstruct such products of imagination, not to believe in them.

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<sup>510</sup> On *ars combinatorica* in general (‘the skill of combinations’ – also cf. *ars inveniendi*, the Early Modern technique for the generation of new ideas; van Peursen 1993), cf. Platzcek 1971. A famous *Ars combinatoria* was that of the mathematician and philosopher von Leibniz, published in Frankfurt am Main in 1666. There have been several (von) Schlegels in the history of 19<sup>th</sup>-c. CE scholarship, and Mudimbe's unreferenced mention does not allow us to determine to which he is referring – most probably to the classicist Friedrich Schlegel.

<sup>511</sup> Cf. Mudimbe (1997: 198):

‘the stories I have chosen to share in these lectures on conversion are, indeed, not only unthinkable outside of a space circumscribed by African elements but also well determined by anthropology and the colonial saga, as well as the practices and missionizing of Islam and Christianity’.

Afrocentricity or Afrocentrism only features *positively* in Mudimbe's work (1997: 160), if at all, in the attenuated, unemotional, domesticated version of Richard Sklar, who (true to the politics of knowledge of the culture wars of the USA in the late twentieth century CE)<sup>512</sup> obliges by spontaneously identifying as Jewish-American, not African American.<sup>513</sup> In the last decade, hundreds of Afrocentrist publications have been written by Black scholars, many of whom would claim that being Black, in the publicly conspicuous somatic sense, is more or less a condition for credible Afrocentrism. Identifying such a movement secondarily by quoting, of all people, a *White* scholar (Sklar) *quoting someone else* (Whitaker) on Afrocentrism, sufficiently indicates that Mudimbe's interests, and especially his sensitivities and empathic capabilities, lie elsewhere. Likewise, when Mudimbe notes that the philosopher Masolo

'chooses to interrogate the very reason that makes his discourse possible',

qualifying his own reading as

'a reconstructivist term which symbolizes many aspects of the struggle of the people of African origin to control their own identity' (Mudimbe 1997: 29),

all Mudimbe has to say is that Masolo here

'plays *dangerously* on an "afrocentricity" perspective' (Mudimbe 1997: 29; my italics).<sup>514</sup>

Why 'dangerously'? Follows Mudimbe's diatribe against Afrocentrism which he calls an attempt to

'essentialize African cultures, reducing the complexity of histories to some metaphors and their variations. In this transposition that is an *Übertragung* [sic; read *Übertragung* – WvB] in a Freudian operation, the real self is lost in a magnificent negation. The contradictory, negotiated, and perpetually recommenced enunciation about oneself – and whose truth is always and already in the apprehension of oneself as a being-for-other – ceases to indicate the intricacy of an existence (of any existence), of a culture (of any culture) as project' (Mudimbe 1997: 30).

In a book that discusses the cultural and religious dimension of the colonial conquest, the devastating effects of Christianity upon African culture and spirituality, the Colonial Library as an objectifying ordered caricature of African socio-cultural realities, *etc.*, *Mudimbe* (who in dress, pastimes and personal network still continues to revisit the Christian orientation of his youth) *finds mildness and patience for most of what came to Africa from the North Atlantic*,

<sup>512</sup> Cf. Berlinerblau 1999, which also includes rich bibliographical materials on the American 'culture wars' of the 1980s-1990s.

<sup>513</sup> Sklar 1993: 98 f. Sklar follows the definition of C.S. Whitaker:

'Properly invoked (...) Afrocentricity[s] (...) importance derives from fundamental issues of comprehension in the wake of powerful intellectual legacies that tend to discount the capacity of African cultures and societies to act rationally and constructively in the face of historic realities. It suggests, importantly, that these realities, not Africans, are the course of problematic conditions.' Whitaker 1991: 359.

<sup>514</sup> The lower-case initial of 'afrocentricity' here is original.

yet at the same time he is very dismissive of the Afrocentrists who, after all, seek to explode the heroic epic of cultural transmutation which Mudimbe sings in his book: the saga of clerical intellectualism. Afrocentrism is reduced by Mudimbe to a mere act of banal Freudian transference, *i.e.* distorted self-projection out of touch with reality. Elsewhere in the book the young African critics of Kagame (Mudimbe 1997: 143), or of the European missionising of Africa,<sup>515</sup> are dismissed by Mudimbe in similarly distancing terms. Here he finds himself in the company of, as I already indicated, Kwame Appiah, another cosmopolitan African philosopher who has endeared himself with North-Atlantic audiences by rejecting the essentialism of Africanness and by mediating, instead, a sensible, middle-of-the-road image of Africa that no longer posits a radical defiance of universalising North Atlantic categories and procedures of thought.<sup>516</sup>

In the same vein, Mudimbe strongly objects both to the substance and to the tone of voice of Diagne's attempt to find a local African grounding for African philosophy:

'Sarcastic, Diagne rejects both the neocentrist Euro-philosophy, as represented by Franz Crahay [ 1965 ], and the critical Marxist Euro-philosophy symbolized by Paulin Hountondji [ 1976 ] and other African disciples of Althusser. They are wrong, states Diagne, in the same way Tempels and his disciples were wrong, because they

"deportent la problematique du fait africain ou négro-africain aussi loin sinon encore plus loin de ses axes que l'ethnophilosophie elle-même" (1981: 83).<sup>517</sup>

They are also wrong, adds Diagne, because in their linking of the genesis of African philosophy to alphabetic revolution in Africa, they are presenting a political thesis: African philosophy is conceived as the consequence of colonization that brought about alphabetic writing and thus let us celebrate colonialism, thanks to which African philosophizing has become possible. One does not understand why Diagne uses disguised or direct insults in order to make his points. On the other hand, it seems to me that his apparently well-evidenced generalizations are not philosophically obvious. The concepts of Africa, Negro-African, for example, are not transparent, particularly when the author claims to extend them as far back as the pharaonic periods. In the same vein, to postulate – from the pharaonic Egypt to Edward Blyden, Ogotemmeli, Anta Diop, Chinua Achebe, Senghor, *etc.* – the continuous epistemological history of a Negro-African cultural context is surely a nice hypothesis, but it is untested and probably untestable.<sup>518</sup> Diagne is more seri-

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<sup>515</sup> 'For people familiar with African Christianity, the conversion model [*i.e.* the approach to Central African Christian intellectual history as propounded in *Tales of Faith - WvB*] in both its intention and realization would describe the African critique as generally violent and often, alas, excessive, not only in its evaluation of conversion policies but also of the missionary.' (Mudimbe 1997: 56)

<sup>516</sup> Appiah 1992; *cf.* Mudimbe 1997: 63 *f.* for a most sympathetic reading; and on Afrocentrism: Appiah 1993: 24-25.

<sup>517</sup> ...'they are wrong for transferring the problematic of the African or the Negro-African factum as far away, and even further than the practitioners of ethnophilosophy.'

<sup>518</sup> With all due respect, I fail to understand why the hypothesis of one sustained sub-Saharan African cultural history extending over several millennia should be considered untested (see my references on the unity of African culture, in the beginning of Chapter 0, above, notably footnote 4), and why it should even be considered inherently untestable. Perhaps because of the

ous in his propositions for an African philosophical praxis. With a few neat strokes, he indicates the theoretical conditions for philosophizing: a *dégg* (argumentation) in which a *texxale* (critical reflection) should be promoted distinguishing valid and non-valid propositions (*woor ag sanxal*) in order to construct a *xelaat* (epistemology). So far there has been nothing quite like this in the confrontation between philosophy and African *Weltanschauungen*. The very fact that in his innovative 'book two' – strangely entitled *Epistemology and Neo-pharaonic Problematics* (1981: 129-219) – Diagne's constant use of Wolof categories is a *tour de force*, may make the translation of texts by Plato, Althusser, Tempels, Crahay, Kagame, Mulago, Diop, Césaire, Senghor, Ndaw, Towa and Hountondji seem a simple curiosity. This takes on a radical meaning when, in his conclusion (1981: 213-19), Diagne puts aside French as mediation and synthesizes his philosophical theses directly in Wolof [ Mudimbe 1997: 104 f. – my italics; Diagne 1981 ] .

How can a person like Mudimbe *not* understand the anger informing Diagne's style of writing? Yet, to show his good will, Mudimbe later on (Mudimbe 1997: 110) adopts Diagne's Wolof philosophical concepts and weaves them into his own cosmopolitan philosophical discourse. But it is Hountondji, despite the geographical and denominational divides that separate him from Mudimbe (Benin versus Congo, Roman Catholicism versus Presbyterianism) who is considered worthy of Mudimbe's praise and who even receives the exceptional honour of being recognised by him as a fellow-*métis* [ in the cultural, not the somatic, sense – WvB ] – a concept to which I shall return at length (Mudimbe 1997: 107 f.).

Mudimbe even concedes (with the placating tones used towards a rebellious child?) that Diagne's Diop-derived Egyptocentrism is 'surely a nice hypothesis', but this again is clearly not Mudimbe's cup of tea. He has no time for Egyptocentrism, and has kept considerable distance from the *Black Athena* debate, to which he would have been eminently qualified to make significant contributions given his unique combination of being the African classicist working in the United States who, moreover, is the most applauded critic of North Atlantic and African constructions of Africa. Apart from a passing reference to Bernal's contribution on *Black Athena* in Harding's *The Racial Economy of Science* (Bernal 1993b; cf. Mudimbe 1997: 187 f.), Mudimbe devoted one short article to the *Black Athena* debate, subsequently incorporated without major changes in *The Idea of Africa* (Mudimbe 1992b: 114-123; 1994a: 93-104).<sup>519</sup> Here he notes the

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paucity of written documents, at least outside Egypt, the Sudan, Islamic West Africa, and Ethiopia, for much of the period covered? Yet such a difficulty may be overcome in a methodologically sophisticated and convincing way, as recent studies considering continuity between pharaonic Egypt and modern sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate (Ndigi 1996, 1997, 2001, 1004; Hilliard 1995; 147; Obenga 1973, 1992, 1993; van Binsbergen 2010a, 2010e, 2011c and extensive references there). By comparison we might ask: *what is so particularly tested, or even testable, about Mudimbe's hypothesis of the existence and the impact of clerical intellectualism?* Its shallow time depth, encompassing only half a century? Its insistence on total literacy? Its intellectual refuge into universalism, at the expense of insisting on African roots?

<sup>519</sup> Meanwhile Mudimbe (2008) has also contributed to the Warwick conference, in which Bernal's *Black Athena Thesis* was more or less canonised as *mainstream classicist scholarship*. Much as I have been inspired by Bernal and have defended his Afrocentrist position against prejudiced opponents, such an adoption into the dominant paradigm of Ancient History I have

following minor disagreements which he, as a classicist and a historian of ideas, has with Bernal. Bernal is reproached by Mudimbe for only minor points: overlooking Herodotos' statement that the Pelasgians were a 'non-Greek speaking populace' (1992b: 116); overlooking Plutarch's accusation against Herodotos (*De Herodoti malignitate*) that the latter magnified the barbarians (Mudimbe 1997: 118, cf. Plutarch [ 1989 ] / 1934a-1935a); that Herodotos naïvely reports on fabulous monsters undermines his credibility on other issues;<sup>520</sup> that Herodotos deliberately constructed his account in *Historiae* so as to humour his audience's nationalism and anti-barbarian feelings (Mudimbe 1997: 118); that also in Herodotos a specific philosophy of history informs the actual narratives, manipulating the facts so as to render their narrative less than totally credible (Mudimbe 1997: 119); most importantly, Mudimbe rightly criticises Bernal's exclusive focus on eighteenth-century CE Germany for the emergence of racist thinking whereas the true place where that ideology arose was France (Mudimbe 1997: 121). Mudimbe is thus far from hostile, and even very helpful. He points out that unidentified 'Black "Afrocentrist" scholars' (Mudimbe 1997: 122) have reproached Bernal for playing down the contribution by Cheik<sup>521</sup> Anta Diop; Mudimbe suggests that this may have been because Bernal is concerned with diffusion from Egypt towards the north, east and west, whereas Diop was mainly concerned with interactions towards the south (Mudimbe 1997: 122 f.). He adduces other potential allies of the *Black Athena* thesis which Bernal has overlooked: Frazer, Budge, Seligman, Frankfort, and more recently and most importantly from the Africanist point of view: Mveng (1972) and Bourgeois (1973). By and large Mudimbe has sympathy for Bernal's *Black Athena* project, but

(...) although I understand the political significance of his project and its usefulness, I am worried by the fact that it might, and very probably will, be manipulated by both the most sophisticated and the least critical of his constituencies for reasons that have nothing to do with science and the search of truth [ (Mudimbe 1992b: 123) ].

Beware of enthusiasm and of demagogic rhetorics, is what Mudimbe seems to be saying here! Not the debunking of North Atlantic hegemonic views of global cultural history, nor the elevation of a parochial, partisan Africa to a position where it can be the cradle of 'Black' [ i.e. Egyptian ] Athena, is what really interests him, but detached more or less universal categories such as science and truth.<sup>522</sup>

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found utterly unjustified considering the fundamental errors of fact and interpretation that continue to adhere to Bernal's work – cf. van Binsbergen 2011, and in that book especially 201f.

<sup>520</sup> Mudimbe 1992b: 118 (in defence of Herodotos, meanwhile cf. Pritchett 1993; Spiegelberg 1927; however, cf. also Moles 1993).

<sup>521</sup> NB: in Mudimbe 1997 (e.g. 30, 102, 119, 171, and index), the name is repeatedly spelled as Sheik, as if it were the (imprecise) English rendering of the Islamic religious title الشيخ *aš-šayḥ*, and not just a given name, as it is usually considered to be. Cf. Amadiume 1997: 468-469; van Sertima 1986; Gray 1989; Fauvelle 1996.

<sup>522</sup> Meanwhile the fact that science is less than universal and e.g. is capable of endorsing racial

We would do injustice to Mudimbe if we pretended that his reservations *vis-à-vis* Afrocentrism and the *Black Athena* debate, and his ignoring African historic religion, were simply an idiosyncratic expression of his cultural and geographical homelessness and nothing more. At the back is a profound methodological dilemma, which attends the entire empirical study of African religion through participant observation or through African believers' introspection, and which comes out clearly in Mudimbe's discussion of Mulago's project:

Theoretically, Mulago's project, as in *Un Visage Africain du Christianisme* (1965), *La Religion Traditionnelle des Bantu et Leur Vision du Monde* (1973), or *Simbolismo Religioso Africano* (1979), can be summed up as follows: in the name of the truths of a locality or place, it questions the pertinence of colonial 'scientific' and 'religious' dominant discourses; insists on their shortcomings by reminding their practitioners that there is always a radical deviation between, on the one hand, a lived experience (*e.g.* succession of seasons) or an experienced fact (*e.g.* death), and, on the other hand, its possible multiple levels of interpretation presented as history, epic or simply narrative. Yet the project itself has recourse to the same controversial logical empiricism it wants to relativise. In fact, the invocation of the truths of the place against those of the interpretive space implies that there is somehow (almost necessarily) better reflections of the locality in the insider's discourse; and this hypothesis then becomes an ideological framework and a means for negotiating a right to the authentic speech in the field of discourses about the native place' (Mudimbe 1997: 89).

If the insider's discourse cannot be trusted to produce a better truth, and if the ethnotheological<sup>523</sup> discourse is in itself external to Africa, then African historic religion may be essentially unknowable and irrelevant.

But by posing the question, and by contesting the validity of the local perspective by reproaching it for its claim of superiority, Mudimbe in fact claims for himself and his North Atlantic academic universalist science a similarly privileged, superior outside position – which apart from being hegemonic would be very un-Foucaultian. African historic culture and religion have a right to affirm themselves for their own sake – which is why a quarter of a century ago, as an accomplished North Atlantic anthropologist of religion, I opted to become a diviner-priest-therapist in the Southern African *sangoma* tradition. Moreover, there is another reason, one to be found within universalising science, why Mudimbe should be far less dismissive of Afrocentrism. Let me elaborate.

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prejudice and enforcing inequalities along racialist lines, is recognised by Mudimbe in his discussion of Sandra Harding (mentioned above in this Chapter; and *cf.* Chapter 13 of the present volume); also *cf.* Mudimbe 1997: 184 *f.*

<sup>523</sup> Mudimbe defines *ethnotheology* as 'a subfield uncomfortably situated between theology and anthropology, opposed to reductionism and claiming to speak in the name of the vitality of local cultures', pointing out that it faces a major paradox: as anthropology ethnotheology affirms local cultures, as theology it denies them for the sake of the hegemony of the imported Christian doctrine (Mudimbe 1997: 88 *f.*).

## 12.5. In vindication of Afrocentrism

One cannot help agreeing with Howe's (1999) and Lefkowitz's (1996) identification of the deficiencies endemic to the Afrocentric genre, which must play a role in Mudimbe's rejection: the poor scholarship; the amateurish, autodidactic approach to grand historical and comparative themes without systematic use of obvious sources and obvious methods; the Afrocentrist authors' manifest and deliberate isolation from current debates and current advances in the fields of scholarship they touch on; and the occasional lapses into Black racism. However, we would be throwing away the baby with the bath water if, in these deficiencies, we seek sufficient reason not to take Afrocentrism seriously, not only as an emancipatory identity expression, but also simply as a form of scientific knowledge production.

For, I fundamentally disagree with these critics of Afrocentrism with regard to the extent of dismissal that Afrocentrism calls for. For Mudimbe, Afrocentrism is sheer transference of an inferiority complex among today's African Americans. For Lefkowitz, it is the celebration of racialist myth disguised as engaged history. For Howe, Afrocentrism is largely what in our Marxist days we used to call false consciousness: a view of reality which is systematically distorted and which can be explained from the historical trajectory traversed, in recent centuries, by the collectivity holding these views. Howe finds Afrocentrism by and large intolerable because, in the context of the politics of identity on which the post-modern world revolves, it is no longer politically correct, yea it is more and more even politically impossible, to publicly ignore or dismiss the Afrocentrist claims; hence their increasing influence in the USA educational system. For Howe (1999: 6), as for me, the central issue here is explicitly the truth value of Afrocentrism. For Howe the truth value of Afrocentrism is zero, in other words Afrocentrism is entirely mythical.<sup>524</sup> For me, very much to the contrary, Afrocentrism (despite its endemic defects signalled above) does contain a kernel of truth, in the form of testable hypotheses about the possible contributions which Africans may have made towards the world-wide development of human culture. Such a position has important political and critical implications. For if there is even the remotest possibility that some of the Afrocentrist tenets (however unscholarly in their present elaboration and substantiation) might yet be confirmed when restated in a scholarly manner and investigated with state-of-the-art scientific methods, then the wholesale dismissal of Afrocentrism cannot simply be the detached, positive, enlightened gesture Howe, Lefkowitz and even Mudimbe claim it to be. Such dismissal risks to be a confirmation of the status quo, a continuation of the processes of exclusion to which Black people, inside and outside Africa, and certainly also in the USA, have been subjected for centuries – an issue which in principle appeals to Mudimbe.

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<sup>524</sup> Once again, for my definitive answer to Howe, cf. van Binsbergen 2011c.

Here there is a political role to be played by the odd person out: the scholar and polemicist who for lack of Black or African antecedents cannot be suspected of being on a mere conscious-raising trip, and who yet, for respectable scholarly reasons, defends views similar to or identical with those of the Afrocentrists. Martin Bernal's has been such a case, inevitably denounced by Howe and Lefkowitz, but treated with far more sympathy by Mudimbe.

Historiographic usage offers a number of ready answers to the fundamental question: *By what method and with what validity and reliability do we construct images of the past?* For Howe, and for many historians like him who situate themselves in the empiricist tradition while being suspicious of an over-reliance on systematic theory, a central methodological approach is that of 'common sense', an appeal to the self-validating effect of simple everyday logic and common (*i.e.* North Atlantic, Western) everyday concepts. Inevitably (since everyday common perspectives are by definition intersubjective, shared with others and recognised to be so shared) a common-sense appeal would favour the paradigms as taken for granted in a given discipline at a given moment of time.

It has been Martin Bernal's merit (1987-2006)<sup>525</sup> to make us aware of the immense historical and political significance of one such historiographic paradigm, whose *demolition* has been the purpose of his *Black Athena* project:<sup>526</sup>

- (a) 'Greek classical culture was essentially *independent* from any inputs from the Ancient Near East (Anatolia, Phoenicia, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia).'

As far as Afrocentrism is concerned, three other such historical paradigms have been dominant throughout the second half of the twentieth century CE:

- (b) 'Ancient Egypt, although situated on the edge of the African continent, was *essentially a non-African civilisation* whose major achievements in the fields of religion, social, political and military organisation, architecture and other crafts, the sciences *etc.*, were largely original and whose historical cultural indebtedness lay, if anything, with West Asia rather than with sub-Saharan Africa'.
- (c) 'Ancient Egypt *did not have a profound, lasting, and therefore traceable impact on the African continent*, particularly not on sub-Saharan Africa'.
- (d) '*Present-day Africa is a patchwork quilt of numerous distinct local cultures, each supported by a distinct language and each giving rise to a distinct ethnic identity, in the light of which broad perspectives on continental cultural continuity going back to the remoter past much be relegated to the realm of ideology and illusion*'.

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<sup>525</sup> Cf. also his contributions in van Binsbergen 1997.

<sup>526</sup> To avoid misunderstanding: I present these dismissive paradigms as those of others, not mine, therefore between parentheses, and it should be clear that (with the partial exception of (b), see van Binsbergen 2011) I do not endorse them.



Phrased in this way, these paradigms, although largely taken for granted by the scholars working in their context, are in principle testable hypotheses. Although they are not intrinsically ideological, unmistakably they well are attuned to a hegemonic North Atlantic perspective on the world. They postulate a world which is neatly compartmentalised; incomparably more so than would be suggested not only by the globalising experience of our own time, but also by the demonstrable proto-globalisation spread of agricultural techniques, weaponry, musical instruments, languages, belief systems including world religions, formal systems such as board-games, divination methods, myths and symbolism, across the African continent and in considerable (though painfully understudied) continuity with the rest of the Old World, and even the New World. Under such alleged compartmentalisation, a whole mythical geopolitics comes into being: the mystery and mystique of Europe – more recently: of the North Atlantic region in general – can be maintained as a solid ideological power base for colonialism and post-colonial hegemony; Egypt, Africa, African cultures, remain the ultimate other, to the North Atlantic and its inhabitants, but also to one another; a conceptual and geopolitical ‘divide and rule’ keeps them in their subordinate place *vis-à-vis* the North Atlantic; and the basic flow of achievement is defined as going from north to south, while the hegemonically undesirable idea of counter-flows in a northerly direction is ruled out. These may be testable hypotheses, but they are very close to geopolitical myths, and we hope that, when properly tested, it turns out that they must be rejected.

If our four paradigms (a) through (d) can be demonstrated to have considerable hegemonic ideological potential (not to say that they are downright Eurocentric and racist), their inverses are likely to have a similar but opposite ideological charge. These inverses would stress historical cultural continuity:

- (a<sub>-inverse</sub>) between Greece and the Ancient Near East including Ancient Egypt;
- (b<sub>-inverse</sub>) between prehistoric cultures situated on the Africa continent South of the Tropic of Cancer (23°27' north), and Ancient Egypt;
- (c<sub>-inverse</sub>) between Ancient Egypt and latter-day African cultures;
- (d<sub>-inverse</sub>) between latter-day African cultures even regardless of the influence of Ancient Egypt.

It is my contention that the paradigms (a<sub>-inverse</sub>) through (d<sub>-inverse</sub>) contain a healthy and serious critique of hegemonic misconceptions, and therefore in themselves should at least be granted some plausibility. It now so happens that these inverse paradigms are among the central tenets of Afrocentrism, tenets which therefore can no longer be relegated to mere false consciousness and Black consciousness-raising, but deserve to be admitted to the central halls of scholarship. To dismiss these inverse views as ‘collective myths’ (Howe, Lefkowitz) or ‘personal myths of transference’ (Mudimbe) is not only doing them

injustice, but also means myopia: the potentially mythical nature of the initial, non-inverse dominant paradigms itself is insufficiently brought to the fore.

In Lefkowitz's case this myopia is manifest, and it was convincingly exposed in Bernal's review of her book *Not Out of Africa* (Bernal 1996-1997). In Mudimbe, a similar myopia risks to go unnoticed, because of his acclaimed status as an African intellectual of great cosmopolitan scholarly accomplishment. Neither is the myopia of Howe's book readily recognised since the execution of its design is largely impeccable. Not being an Africanist himself, he can only be praised for the meticulous way in which he has digested the vast relevant bibliography, offering a middle-of-the-road synthesis in line with the dominant paradigms (a) through (d). He finds little, in the enormous literature he has plodded through, to falsify the dominant common-sense paradigms (a) through (d); but did he search hard enough and closely enough? To Howe,

'the actual evidence of ideas about kingship paralleling Egypt's either in Sub-Saharan Africa or in the Aegean is extremely thin' (1999: 130).

On the basis of what kind of authority is such a statement made? My own discovery of very extensive Egyptian parallels in the material on Zambian kingship (van Binsbergen 2010a) *came only after studying Nkoya kingship and myths for twenty years, from the inside, and after far more extensive exposure to Ancient Near Eastern studies than anthropologists and Africanists normally get;*<sup>527</sup> this suggests some of the methodological and paradigmatic problems involved: usually the more one specialises in one spatio-temporally specific domain of human culture, the less likely one is to gain similarly detailed and up-to-date information on other domains, and the more likely one is to retreat into myopic paradigmatic self-evidences. Contrary to what Howe claims, the evidence on parallels between Ancient Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa is massive, though uneven.<sup>528</sup>

These four hypotheses and their radical, Afrocentrist inverses enable us to articulate Mudimbe's contradictory positioning within the globalising politics of knowledge on Africa. As is clear from his discussion of Bernal, he is inclined to accept the first inverse hypothesis, but considers it dangerous and scholarly vulnerable. He does not pronounce himself on the second inverse hypothesis.<sup>529</sup> He considers the third inverse hypothesis 'nice', but untested and probably untestable. And he rejects the fourth inverse hypothesis. Surprising in the light of his track record (including seminal Mudimbe titles as *The Invention of Africa* and *The Idea of Africa*), by and large he shows himself to be rather on the side of established, potentially hegemonic 'common-sense' models of African history

<sup>527</sup> I was a full-time member of the Working Group on Religion and Magic in the Ancient Near East, Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, Wassenaar, The Netherlands, 1994-1995, and published on Ancient Mesopotamian magic and Bronze Age ethnicity in the Eastern Mediterranean including Egypt and Syro-Palestine.

<sup>528</sup> Shinnie 1971: 447f.; van Binsbergen 2010c, with extensive references.

<sup>529</sup> At least not in Mudimbe 1997, and in the selection of his other publications on which my present argument is based.

in line with dominant universalising science, and he turns out to be considerably less sensitive to the modern politics of knowledge on Africa than one would expect considering the fact that he is the most famous critique of North Atlantic constructions of Africa.

Scholarly reputations are readily sacrificed on the altar of Howe's indignation *vis-à-vis* Afrocentrism, and the more readily, the less Howe knows of their specialist field: Clyde Ahmad Winters, Herodotos, Henry Frankfort, Frobenius, Sergi. These ancient and modern scholars have, beside their stature and the esteem they met from their peers, one thing in common which makes them unwelcome in the common-sense, main-stream paradigmatic world to whose authority Howe appeals. They all display the ability to think *across* established cultural and geopolitical boundaries, whether this meant explaining the origin of the Persian wars in a complex context encompassing the entire Ancient World (Herodotos), or lumping Egypt and Mesopotamia in one grand argument (Frankfort's *Kingship and the Gods* – 1948), or stressing the essential continuity between West Africa, North Africa, Europe, and Asia, when it comes to somatic traits, kinship patterns, languages, and symbolism. Not surprisingly, Howe's villains appear as intellectual heroes in some of my own work. I am pleased to add that, as a sign of Mudimbe's ambivalent positioning in this problematic, at least two of Howe's villains appear as potential allies, if not heroes, also with Mudimbe (Frobenius and Frankfort).

## **12.6. The prominence of death in Mudimbe's work**

Because of Mudimbe's relentless insistence on originality, which betrays the literary writer, there is an essential unpredictability about his work, which makes it as incomparably more difficult to read and to grasp than the average Africanist academic text production along disciplinary lines (African anthropology, history, religious studies, philosophy, theology *etc.*), and renders this oeuvre one of the most impressive, moving and original bodies of texts to have risen from the modern (post-eighteenth century CE) encounter between Africa and the North Atlantic.

Like all true poets, Mudimbe's writing is essentially a writing in the face of death. It took a while before this insight dawned upon me. I was at first puzzled by the uncanny prominence of references to parricide (often solemnly and in Freudian fashion called 'the Murder of the Father' – bar the capitalisation) in his approaches to African literature, ethnotheology and philosophy (Mudimbe 1991b: 71 *f.*, and 1992a). Thus when Paul-Michel Foucault in early adult life drops the 'Paul' which was the given name of his father and grandfather, and lives on with only the 'Michel' which his mother gave him, Mudimbe interprets this in the line of Lacan and Freud as parricide, even though by the same time Mudimbe claims to

have proceeded to a Jungian perspective (Mudimbe 1991a: xi) which would lay less stress on the sexual scheme but instead would favour an interpretation in terms of a heroic mother-son myth.<sup>530</sup> Likewise it is Kasavubu's rejection of Lumumba's parricidal challenge of the former colonising power at the moment of Congo's Independence, which, in Mudimbe's off-hand analysis, led to Lumumba's isolation and murder (Mudimbe 1997: 131). Parricidal is the revolt of younger African philosophers against their African predecessors,<sup>531</sup> while Kagame himself seems to have incited yet another form of parricide:

'Within a few weeks, I saw him convert entire annual classes of students to a 'nationalistic' view of African history and philology. I told him that I feared that such a perspective, by generously glossing over the epistemological preconditions of the murder of the Father, ran the risk of further perverting the discipline of the social sciences in Africa, already so encumbered by *a priori* ideological assumptions of 'colonial science'. His response was surprising to me in its simplicity: 'obsession is also a path to the truth' (Mudimbe 1997: 140).<sup>532</sup>

From his own itinerary, this form of parricide appears to be what Mudimbe fears most. For when in the middle of the twentieth century CE Central African Roman Catholic clerical intellectuals can be seen to struggle with the question as to how much of global Christianity and North Atlantic philosophy and science they can retain while asserting their rightful difference *vis-à-vis* that imported foreign body of ideas and *vis-à-vis* the hegemonic power of the Europeans who persuaded or forced them to accept that body and built it into their very lives, that retention is suggested to be *a refusal on their part to proceed to parricide*. (Is there a pun here on the English word *father* as meaning 'religious cleric'? Would *parricide* mean the mental killing of the *religious fathers* that supervised these African clerics' education?) In the concluding chapter of *l'Odeur du Père* (1982), Mudimbe defends himself against Willame's (1976) critique of *L'Autre Face du Royaume*: the suggestion of an incitement to revolutionary parricide with which that earlier book had ended, according to Mudimbe's clarification has been misunderstood by Willame and has only a very precise, coded, psychoanalytical symbolic meaning which however escapes me:

'À présent, j'aimerais savoir ce que l'on entend exactement quand on me parle de

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<sup>530</sup> Cf. Jung 1987. The mytheme of the Virgin Mother and her Only Son who becomes her lover and with her produces the entire world, appears to go back to the hypothetical Upper Palaeolithic motif of the Mother of the Waters, and has ubiquitous apparent traces in comparative mythology, including in the Ancient World (where it resonates in the so-called Orphic cosmogony, but also in *Argonautica* (Apollonius Rhodius 1.503-506; in Graves 1964 / 1955: 27 f. as 'Pelagian creation myth'), and in the mythological relationship between the sea goddess Thetis and her son Achilleus (Homer, *Ilias, passim*) – Achilleus was also venerated as a sea god especially in the Pontic region) and in Christianity (Jesus and Mary).

<sup>531</sup> Cf. Mudimbe 1997: 104 (for Diagne) and 143 (for Kagame).

<sup>532</sup> Interestingly, and characteristically, we see here Mudimbe, when in disagreement with a colleague, and from a position of institutional authority and responsibility, appeal to the very methods and theories which he himself chose to utterly ignore in his own work.

'meurtre du père'. J'ai accepté cette expression imagée (*Recherche, Pédagogie et Culture*, n° 20) pour dire une infirmité et non pour la vivre en une utopie faite d'harmonie. Je n'ai point plaidé pour une immobilité heureuse qu'accomplirait simplement un cri, mais invoque cette manière de mouvement tres violent dont parle Freud en conclusion de son analyse de l'Homme aux loups. Et bien entendu, qu'on le sache, ce dernier appel n'a rien à voir avec l'aphanisis. Vraiment?' (Mudimbe 1982: 203, responding to Willame 1976).

The point escapes me, *partly* because I cannot clearly identify whose desire is disappearing here and why. But there is an echo here of passages in *Tales of Faith* (Mudimbe 1997: 112 f., 175) where Mudimbe repeatedly speaks of the new desire among young converts that emerged as a result of missionising, and whose transformed and transgressive fulfilment was the project of clerical intellectualism; *partly* because Freud's *Wolf-man* (Gardiner 1972; cf. Freud 1953-1974) ends with an evocation not of parricide, but of a strikingly different not to say opposite form of violence: the phantasised homosexual, anal rape (strangely reminiscent of Horus, Seth, Osiris and Isis; van Binsbergen 2012d: 133) of the son by the father.

The fact that, in the face of overwhelming evidence concerning the eradication of African historic religion, Mudimbe refuses to make a definitive statement against Christianity and its negative effects on Africa, means that (as *Tales of Faith* makes very clear – as does his style of dress, his breviary and his reliance on a clerical network) even though he has become an agnostic, he cannot bring himself to commit parricide *vis-à-vis* the Roman Catholic Church.

It is not clear what all these insistences on symbolic or vicarious parricide mean in relation to Mudimbe's biological father, about whom I could only pick up from his texts that he was of Songye extraction, while his mother was Luba- Lulua. Death appears not only as the murder of the father contemplated to be possible but, after all, undesirable, or as the others' parricide to be condemned, but particularly as Mudimbe's own death:

'Is there any individual, reflecting on his or her finitude, who does not experience the sense of being or, at any rate, of belonging to an endangered species? Death, as a closure of existence in the world, sanctions the absurdity or – if one prefers – the mystery of life and forces the observer to evaluate existence from the background of a culture and its *a priori*s. My sense of belonging to a group reflects a degree of my insertion into its culture, and what my death might signify when I am gone would be my ways of witnessing to the arbitrariness of my culture. The plurality of cultural *a priori*s is an empirical fact' (Mudimbe 1997: 199).

## 12.7. An excursion into the plurality of African cultures

In the preceding quotation, what could Mudimbe's expressions 'my sense of belonging to a group' and 'my culture'<sup>533</sup> possibly mean, coming from a person

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<sup>533</sup> In this Section, also echoes are heard of an appreciably different yet related argument, which however is perpendicular to the Mudimbe-related issues at hand. I first set out this alternative argument in my 1999 Rotterdam inaugural, to the effect that '*cultures* [ with emphasis on the plural ] *do not exist*' (van Binsbergen 1999a, greatly revised version 2003b). My argument was that, since we cannot lead a total life from morning to evening and from the cradle to the grave in yet

whose life's itinerary has been the celebration of homelessness? And why should he join in the now obsolescent reification of culture? We are facing the paradox that Mudimbe in his method of philosophy and intellectual history, and in the face of many African intellectuals' affirmations of the local, retreats to the implied, if qualified (Mudimbe 1997: 187 *f.*), universalism of the current North Atlantic dominant academic discourse, yet affirms the allegedly *sui generis* plurality of African cultures as an empirically demonstrated fact and as one of the achievements of the paradigmatic shift occurring in anthropology with the transition from pre-classic (diffusionism, evolutionism, organicism) to classic (structural-functionalist) versions of that discipline in the first half of the twentieth century: CE

'Concrete examples of methodological procedures that managed to recognize the proper historic and cultural specificities of each human group were studies in anthropology of African religions published or signed by M. Fortes (1959, 1965), John Middleton (1960), Marcel Griaule (1948) and Luc de Heusch (1958, 1971, 1972). They taught us that an account of, and attention to, each group's cultural arbitrariness and specific history enabled us to understand that the less visible aspect of cultural transformations might perhaps be the most important from a historical perspective' (Mudimbe 1997: 161).

There is room for amazement here. Few African scholars today, and a diminishing number of non-African Africanists, could be tempted to sing the praises of these works which, although great achievements in their time, are now unmistakably dated. These books rely on structural-functionalist and structuralist models which have since been severely criticised, precisely because – exactly opposite to what Mudimbe suggests – *they are inherently a-historical*. They depict these distinct 'cultures' as timeless givens waiting to be intellectually appropriated into the present through the presentist anthropological technique of participant observation – with the sole exception of de Heusch's work, whose attempt to reconstruct the conjectural 'archaeology of Bantu thought' has since been dismissed by the Nestor of African history, Vansina, for being merely elegant (*i.e.* system-driven, structuralist) instead of genuinely historical (Vansina 1983; *cf.* van Binsbergen 1992a: 239 *f.*). Moreover these famous anthropological works reflect the 'divide and rule' fragmentation of the African socio-cultural-political space which is a direct product of colonial conquest and colonial administration. They reinforce the image of Africa as a patchwork quilt of bounded, self-contained, mutually unrelated and internally highly integrated and structured distinct 'cultures', each to be neatly identified by its ethnic name. In other words, they perpetuate the Colonial Library and its epistemo-

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one, supposedly bounded, culture, but are constantly oscillating between the various constituent cultural orientations in a repertoire comprising several ones, it is nonsense to use the concept of culture in the plural as if we are dealing with a countable series of entities, rather than with 'the quality of being culturally programmed' – the latter does not imply one bounded and integrated culture. Such programming in itself I did not deny, and on second thoughts I have realised even the occasional inescapability of such programming – but again, at the same time every social Ego is involved in the parallel results of several such programmings, each of them affecting that Ego's life only partially and situationally. This was also my defiant answer to the reification of the *one culture* (the one that is 'traditionally ours' and that others 'are compelled to recognise and respect' as life itself) which has been one of the most manipulative and deceptive fruits of the concept of the 'multicultural society'.

logical and methodological shortcomings, which Mudimbe himself has greatly helped us to spot but, with his usual mildness of judgement, adamantly refusing to throw away the baby with the bath water: however defective and distorting, the Colonial Library is for him also the basis of valid African scholarship by Africans (Mudimbe 1997: 180).

The distinctiveness of African cultures is almost a dogma of cosmopolitan African philosophy, which thus denies what Afrocentrist scholars, and their European allies and predecessors have insisted on: *the considerable historical cultural unity of Africa*, certainly on a regional level comprising entire sets of previously distinguished 'ethnic cultures', and in certain respects perhaps even on a continental scale (*cf.* above, pp. 8 *f.*). Mudimbe is not alone in his affirmation of African cultural fragmentation. It is remarkable that outside Afrocentrist circles, the argument of convergence and unity has met with so little acceptance among African philosophers today. Instead they virtually unanimously support the argument of cultural diversity. In Appiah's words:

'If we could have traveled through Africa's many cultures in (...) [precolonial times] from the small groups of Bushman hunter-gatherers, with their stone-age materials, to the Hausa kingdoms, rich in worked metal – we should have felt in every place profoundly different impulses, ideas, and forms of life. To speak of an African identity in the nineteenth century – if an identity is a coalescence of mutually responsive (if sometimes conflicting) modes of conduct, habits of thought, and patterns of evaluation; in short, a coherent kind of human social psychology – would have been "to give to nothing a local habitation and a name."' (Appiah 1992: 174, cited in approval by Bell 1997: 218 *f.* n. 29)

In line with this stress on precolonial fragmentation lies the African philosopher's Kaphagawani's thesis on 'C<sup>4</sup>', which is a scientific formula meant to express

'the Contemporary Confluence of Cultures on the Continent of Africa. This is a post-colonial phenomenon where different cultures meet and mingle to form new, hybrid forms' (Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998: 209).

In this formulation the emphasis on a plurality of mutually distinct and bounded cultures does give way to a recognition of greater unity, but extreme multiplicity and fragmentation is still held to be the hallmark of the African past, the point of departure. Such unity between African cultures as is being recognised is taken to be the result of the post-colonial phenomenon of globalisation, which allows this view to salvage the concept of a pristine distinctness of a great number of distinct precolonial cultures in Africa.

The dilemma between a universalising method and a fragmenting description, which Mudimbe is facing here, is not a sign of reproachable weakness on his part, but appears as an inevitable consequence of academic knowledge production through written texts. He knows exactly what the dilemma is, as is clear from the following passage, yet in order to produce a meaningful text he chooses one side of the contradiction, and leaves the other side for others to articulate:

'In the 1950s, the structuralist wave in anthropology attempted, in terms of a critique that it strived to establish in relation to the West, to be the sign of a respectful gaze on difference and, in this capacity, maintained that it studied societies that were or are different – both for themselves and in themselves. Yet, there again, the fundamental problem remains, namely, in this process, the relationship of Western culture to other cultures. As Anouar Abdel Malek says, one can affirm methodologically that the century-old refinement of the means of analysing still does not change the very nature of the analysis undertaken. In our day, just as in the Age of Enlightenment, such an analysis falls under the jurisdiction of the will to universalism, under the assumption that all social phenomena are immediately reducible to a single grid (....).

To put it in a provocative manner, any Africa researcher should at least pause momentarily on the following small points in order to ponder his or her scientific or religious practice. The West created the 'pagan' in order to 'Christianize', 'underdevelopment' in order to 'develop', the 'primitive' in order to engage in 'anthropology' and 'civilize'. These banalities overlay crushing models that must either be accepted or re-evaluated (Mudimbe 1997: 168 f.).

## 12.8. Death again

After this excursion into the modern concept of culture, let us return to a more ultimate concern: death. On the one hand Mudimbe affirms, against the tide of the Africanist anthropology of the turn of the twenty-first century CE, the irreducible plurality of African cultures (the same plurality, incidentally, around which the Colonial Library was built and ordered). Mudimbe's sympathy for the gems of classic anthropology as produced by Fortes, Middleton, Griaule, and de Heusch, as discussed above, suggests that he sees them as *an anthropological opening up to the affirmation and liberation of African difference*. But as he affirms, a greater liberation still lies in the realisation that death (the central undercurrent in his work) is the hallmark of cultural purity (the kind of cultural purity affirmed by the classic anthropological model of ethnic diversity and boundedness), so that the affirmation of cultural *métissage* is nothing but the only effective strategy of survival:

'Then, strictly speaking, who is not a *métis*? How can any culture claim the purity of an absolute and uncontaminated identity, a pure essence, if, by analogically extending the paradox of an impossible stable identity of the I to a We-subject, we accept that a pure culture-island will become a corpse-culture?' (Mudimbe 1997: 199 f.)

Perhaps my expression 'the affirmation of cultural *métissage* as the only effective strategy of survival' applies to Mudimbe's life in the most literal sense. In the frankly autobiographical Introduction to *Parables and Fables* (1991a), the idea of writing in the face of death comes back: in the early 1970s,<sup>534</sup> Mudimbe, then in his

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<sup>534</sup> Mudimbe (1991a: x) dates this illness at five years after the submission of his doctoral dissertation at Louvain in 1970, but since *Entretailles* was already published in 1973, we have to question either this dating, or the claim of that book having been written within five months before or after *Le Bel Immonde* (published 1976) and *L'Autre Face du Royaume* (published 1974).



early thirties, was diagnosed to be dying of bone cancer, and in anticipatory defiance of such a fate he wrote three books in five months: *Entretailles* (poetry, published 1973, and dedicated to the memory of his French informally adopted brother who was also his student, and who died in a motor accident together with his intended bride), *Le Bel Immonde* (a novel, published 1976, featuring Central African politics), and *L'Autre Face du Royaume*, his first attempt

'to interrogate the paradoxes of the social and human sciences (...) specifically (...) anthropology' (Mudimbe 1973, 1976, 1974).

In these three books the total of Mudimbe's struggle is contained: the Africa he leaves behind him, Europe which is a vehicle in his intellectual and existential reorientation, and placeless universal science which is to become his airy home. The diagnosis of bone cancer proved wrong, and Mudimbe '*...lived on, flew on...*' (Nabokov, *Pale Fire*), and became a famous cosmopolitan post-African scholar. Below I will suggest how it is possible to interpret this episode of death-fearing creativity along North-Atlantic models, as an escape from another death that did actually occur: *that of African historic culture and religion inside him.*

## 12.9. Métissité

The reader of *Tales of Faith*, who has increasingly wondered how its author himself would identify, given his geographical, cultural and academic disciplinary homelessness, only gradually begins to realise that Mudimbe, too, identifies as of 'mixed cultural descent', until he declares so explicitly at the end of the book:

'The identity of any individual or human community actualizes itself as a process through three main *ekstases*:<sup>535</sup> temporalization, or a subjective procedure whereby an individual or a collective consciousness negotiates the norms for its duration as being, as well as those of things in the world; reflection, or the incredible assumption of a reflecting consciousness present in, and separated from, a consciousness reflected on; finally, the last *ekstasis*, being-for-others, during which the self conflictually apprehends itself outside of itself as an object for others. These experiences of a consciousness, standing out of itself in order to grasp and comprehend its always fluctuating identity, show well the impossibility of reducing anyone, any human culture, to an immobile essence. More importantly, living, acting and believing in a world in which there is always a history – and there are already other people preceding me – whatever I do, as Sartre would have said, I accomplish it in relation to others. I mean precisely that any action is always a consequence of my original sin, my upsurge in a world where I am not alone: *métis*, because of my very identity, which can only be a continuous project towards a transcendence; *métis*, also, by being there and evolving in a space – simultaneously real and constructed – already circumscribed and colonized by others' history, even when these predecessors or contemporaries of mine are my people. Finally, I am a *métis* in the very consciousness of conceiving and apprehending my freedom as both lack and need actualizing itself simultaneously as a negative and positive praxis that is, a negative, purposeful activity because


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<sup>535</sup> ἔκστασις, *ekstasis* is a Ancient Greek word used in the sense of 'displacement, terror, alienation, trance'; Liddell *et al.* 1897: s.v. ἔκστασις, pp. 443-444.

it signifies in what it is the negation of a given; positive, since it is an opening in what is coming. [ This follows a quote from Sartre, 1943 / 1956: 31 – WvB ]. Then, strictly speaking, who is not a *métis*? How can any culture claim the purity of an absolute and uncontaminated identity, a pure essence, if, by analogically extending the paradox of an impossible stable identity of the I to a We-subject, we accept that a pure culture-island will become a corpse-culture? (Mudimbe 1997: 199 f., also partly quoted two pages up).


Here the reader's hunch which has built up throughout the book is finally confirmed: *Tales of Faith* is an unusual narrative, and not a detached exercise in the history of ideas, not even a philosophical treatise. It is primarily an attempt to articulate in text a personal autobiographical itinerary, and to assess the end station of *métissité* to which it has taken its author. Who am I to question the success of his efforts, and the credibility of his claims? Let us listen once more to Mudimbe's characterisation of *Tales of Faith*:

'*Tales of Faith* is about the strange constructed place I chose in inhabit so that I could think about the unthinkable: how well the predicament of Sartre's pessimism in 'Hell is other people', meets the supreme beauty of 'I am an Other'. The two positions are inseparable in this space, in which identities are always mixtures facing each other as competitive projects aimed at, to use Schlegel's language, an impossible *ars combinatoria* – I mean a universal and definitive "logical chemistry"' (Mudimbe 1997: 202).

Mudimbe basically writes from a position of homelessness. He spiritually inhabits his *métissité* rather than Congo or Africa. Perhaps it was no accident that his 1970 PhD thesis was on the semantics of *air*, not earth, water, or fire: the least committal element, suspended between Heaven and Earth whom the Egyptian air-god  Šw / Shu,<sup>536</sup> being their father (one of the first two creatures, whom Atum produced through masturbation), violently separated from their embrace; the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign shows a feather followed by phonetic and semantic determinants.

Mudimbe analyses other people's *Tales, Parables and Fables, Ideas and Inventions*, but for his personal needs retreats to the bare and windy rocks of agnosticism. His Africa is that of other people, it does not exist as a tangible reality for himself, but at best constitutes a context for contestation, a laboratory for the politics of the liberation of difference. I find this a courageous position, which does do justice to the efforts of Africa-based or Africa-derived subjects as well as to the efforts of Africanists. One of the most remarkable characteristics of Mudimbe's writing of the last two decades is his earnest wisdom, which (contrary to mine!) never resorts to cheap attacks, never rushes to easy victories, always sees a glimpse of value and redemption in even the most formida-

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<sup>536</sup> te Velde 1975-1986; Bonnet 1971 / 1952; de Buck 1947. Also the unilateral mythological being Luwe, as – in von Sicard's (1968-1969) characterisation – 'an ancient hunting / w e a t h e r / herding / blacksmithing god', seems to be somehow close to the same semantic complex. Also see above, my remarks on Hera (footnote 237), who (suspended between Heaven and Earth, and probably representing Empedocles' element 'air') has much in common with Shu's Egyptian, female counterpart  Tefnut.

ble constructions of hegemonic power, including the Colonial Library itself.

But having said this, let me add that it is also a tragic position, which (apparently because Africa can no longer be a home to Mudimbe) in its rejection of all intellectual claims of African localities, risks to dissolve whatever capacity Africa has of offering a home, with all the spiritual comforts and technologies of sociability, reconciliation, diagnosis and healing which a real home entails. The full armour furnished by literary science, psychoanalysis and Western philosophy, the impressive capability of correctly invoking, in one passage, elements from Thucydides, Plutarch, Heidegger, Sartre, Freud, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan as the very household words they clearly are to him, does not quite dispel the stifling air of emptiness. The construction of self through the liberation of difference, on which Central African clerical intellectualism revolves, is a politics of textual performance, not of substance: asserting difference, not contents, seems to be the game. Ancestral African forms are completely ignored in the process, for these clerical intellectuals have rendered them incredible, first by Christianity, then by agnosticism. Identity is an adventure, not an achievement.

The exemplary clerical intellectuals like Kagame, who have combined the intellectual articulation of their difference as African intellectuals with a total relinquishing of African historic religion, are for Mudimbe the real prophets (Mudimbe 1997: 175) of twentieth-century CE Central African religion. By contrast, prophetism as an aspect of historic African religion is omitted from Mudimbe's narrative, and hardly more than an afterthought is spared for the prophets who have manifestly combined a Christian inspiration with a continued reliance on a sizeable selection of historic African religion, such as Simon Kimbangu, Alice Lenshina, or the numerous self-styled witchcraft eradicators who, with a selective and often rapidly eroding Christian specifically Watchtower inspiration, flooded the countryside of Central Africa from about 1920 onwards.<sup>537</sup>

Let us dwell a bit on the notion of cultural *métissage*, which (although used by Mudimbe in an English-language book as if no translation of the term was needed) I propose to translate as 'the condition of being of culturally mixed descent'. The concept is borrowed, ultimately from the French colonial language of race, and more directly from an important critical reflection upon colonialism and its language, notably Amselle's seminal discussion of African ethnicity<sup>538</sup> as a recent invention within colonial society. Schilder and I have tried to distance ourselves from the constructivism and presentism associated with Amselle's view, albeit in terms which probably created misunderstanding

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<sup>537</sup> van Binsbergen 1981; Fields 1985. Elsewhere Mudimbe takes up the issue of prophetism in Central Africa at greater length, but along essentially the same lines (Mudimbe 1991a: 1-31).

<sup>538</sup> Amselle 1990. For a similar view on anglophone and lusophone Africa, cf. Vail 1989. Cf. Mudimbe 1997: 152.

and which Amselle declared a caricature of his views.<sup>539</sup> However this may be, the concept of *métissage* has implications which cast a critical light on Mudimbe's analysis. In the first place it is a biological metaphor, evoking the necessity of the blind play of genes, as against the freedom, choice, or contingency of cultural strategies. Mudimbe's heroes, the clerical intellectuals, could freely contemplate and reject the idea of parricide on their European clerical superiors and intellectual predecessors while their historic African allegiance had already been killed by others than themselves; this shows that the biological metaphor of blind genetic necessity is misleading. Mudimbe must be aware of this, considering his lucid and state-of-the-art treatment of race as a biologically non-viable political ideology in modern science and society. (Mudimbe 1997: 184 f.)

The biological metaphor is also misleading for another reason. In the biological process of genetic mixture, the genotype displays the more or less equitable combination of two sets of identifiable factors (genes, chromosomes), each set making for either of the original two phenotypes involved; depending on how many different genes control the specific traits in the original phenotypes, the features of the resulting mixed phenotype may range somewhere in between both originals, or (if few genes are involved and some of the values these genes take are dominant, other recessive) the mixed phenotype may look rather like one of the two originals. Neither situation obtains in the case of cultural mixed descent as described by Mudimbe. There is no evidence that in the case of these clerical intellectuals African historic religion and Christianity have somehow achieved an equitable mixture, or that at least deep down, in subconscious layers of their personalities, the African cultural elements linger on even though these do not directly manifest themselves in their overt behaviour, in their 'performance'. What we see is African clerical intellectuals who have been effectively socialised into a North Atlantic and increasingly global culture, yet successfully asserting a difference *vis-à-vis* their North Atlantic superiors. And this they manage to do, not by publicly articulating intact and authentic chunks of African traditional religion and incorporating these into their public conscious lives (they are not overtly praying to their ancestors, they are not overtly staging puberty rites, they do not – at least not publicly! – celebrate life force in sexuality, nor engage in human sacrifice in order to propitiate royal ancestors or luck-bringing familiar spirits). Their difference is asserted simply by claiming the right to define themselves as an irreducibly new form of sociocultural existence, in which the practically wholesale adoption of the global model of clerical intellectualism goes hand in hand with their writing about a small selection of utterly externalised, objectified, distanced and transformed (in other words, virtualised) images of African traditional religion. They may reinvoke, through retrodiction, the African spiritual past provided that they emphatically do not

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<sup>539</sup> Amselle, intervention at a 1995 seminar at Leiden; Schilder & van Binsbergen 1993; van Binsbergen 1997b; van Binsbergen 1992b / 1994.

live it any more, and in that respect their transformative appropriation of that past is both a departure from, and a simple extension of, the so-called Colonial Library which is central to Mudimbe's arguments on knowledge production under conditions of military and spiritual conquest in Central Africa. *In short, these clerical intellectuals are not of cultural mixed descent, but they are in fact mutations* within the global clerical intellectual order – mutation here being defined in the original Hugo-de-Vries sense of a radical and unsystematic change (in genotype) leading to a radically new and unpredictable manifestation (in phenotype). These clerical intellectuals represent a new cultural form, whose Africanness perhaps consists in the somatic and geographical characteristics of their bearers, and in the geographical provenance of the cultural material they distantly and selectively appropriate and transform in intellectual text products. Their Africanness does scarcely consist in any sort of lived and professed continuity with the African historic religion. What Mudimbe describes in *Tales of Faith* is the emergence of a new local variant of global culture which has become dominant among the religious, educational and political elite of Central Africa, with similar forms elsewhere in Africa and in the South in general.

'The Library is thus not only the absolute shining power in terms of classification of beings and things but the locus in which all knowledge transmutes itself into science. (...) From this perspective, colonial sciences (...) assure both the universality and absolute validity of the Western historical experience, and hence the imperativeness of African conversion to its solidity and logic' (Mudimbe 1997: 179 f.).

This is very different, and far more penetrating and convincing, than Horton's 'African conversion' argument which was launched in the early 1970s and greatly influenced the Ranger School of African religious history: the idea that African conversion to world religions in the late precolonial period simply fitted in with the widening up of political, social and economic horizons in the African countryside, since only a monotheistic High God was commensurate to those new secular realities (Horton 1971, 1975). But again, Mudimbe seems to do himself to African historic religion what he exposes as a colonial hegemonic strategy: does he not himself, *vis-à-vis* African historic religion, assert, like the very Colonial Library he is critiquing in the above quotation,

'both the universality and absolute validity of the Western historical experience, and hence the imperativeness of African conversion to its solidity and logic?' (Mudimbe 1997: 179 f.)

The point is not that Mudimbe's understanding of the conversion process is to be faulted. Most illuminatingly he argues this process to consist of a triple negation: of otherness, of the plurality of histories, and of any rationality to be found outside the respectable Judaeo-Greek philosophical canon (Mudimbe 1997: 147). He demonstrates how nineteenth-century CE North Atlantic thought, spell-bound by Hegel, does not allow for a plurality of histories, so in that context Africa does not and cannot exist. What Mudimbe does not seem to realise is that his very critique of this conversion process, which produced him and hence has taken on a personal reality from which he can as little detach

himself as from his body or from the air (!) he breathes, overdetermines him to take such deconstructive, dismissive views of Africa and of African historic religion as he does take:

‘Consequently, conversion is an imperative, a *sine qua non* condition for inscribing oneself into a history’ (Mudimbe 1997: 59).

Of course Mudimbe means this statement as a rendering of the hegemonic pre-conceptions of missionary Christianity. But that does not take away the fact that, in banning African historic religion from the substance of his argument, denying it rationality, repeatedly dismissing it as incredible as if it can be totally assessed by epistemological criteria, and in glorifying the project of clerical and post-clerical intellectualism from which his own career and mutant identity have sprung, he takes the personal fact and necessity of such conversion for granted.

## 12.10. Mudimbe and historic African religion

Remarkably, I have not yet spotted any passage in Mudimbe’s oeuvre (but I may easily have missed it considering its size and bilingual nature) where the concept of parricide is applied to the unmistakable lack of demonstrable retention of any historic Central African religion on the part of these clerics and post-clerics (like Mudimbe himself). They tended to be second or third generation Christians, and hence one might surmise that others had done the killing of local historic religion for them: their own parents, and the missionaries who had somehow managed to substitute themselves as father figures in the place of the paternal kin of these African clerical intellectuals. The message, so implicit as to be entirely taken for granted, of Mudimbe’s kaleidoscopic and multi-genre narrative of the itinerary of these African clerical intellectuals in his book *Tales of Faith*, is that by the middle of the twentieth century CE none of them was in direct personal contact any more, as a practitioner, with Central African historic religion. Kagame’s search as a student at the major seminary, to find what he finally was to call *La Philosophie Bantu-rwandaise de l’Être* (Kagame 1955), was a retrieval from afar, a reconstruction on the basis of deliberate research. Mudimbe had to base his own highly recommendable close readings of Congolese myths of genesis and other historic religious texts on an experience testifying to his cultural homelessness, in the following passage already considered in full above:

‘My experience would define itself somewhere between the practice of philosophy with its possible intercultural applications<sup>540</sup> and the sociocultural and intersubjective space

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<sup>540</sup> Elsewhere in the same book Mudimbe is to declare his

‘indebtedness to Willy Bal. Thirty years ago, he taught me how to read a text with a philologist’s eye, and later on, at Louvain, he patiently introduced me to the art of reading as a demanding undertaking’ (Mudimbe 1991a: xxii; cf. Bal 1963).

which made me possible...’ (Mudimbe 1991a: 124 f.).<sup>541</sup>

Beyond what is implied and hidden in such local languages as one learns to speak as a child and a teenager, one can hope to inherit but very little of historic African religion in such an itinerary from the age of five or six on. It is therefore unlikely that, instead of the previous killing of this paternal culture by others, a different mythical scheme should be invoked here: African historic religion, Africa in general as a myth and a concept, does not consciously appear here as the mother however prominent that image is in the construction of the African continent by writers as diverse as Basil Davidson (1961) and the Afrocentrist ben-Jochanan (1988). There appears to be no deliberate maternal imagery of Africa in Mudimbe’s work, no attempt to direct a filial mystique of love and identification upon the idea of that continent. Only by gross imposition might one interpret Mudimbe’s consistent, repeated, and relentless deconstruction of the idea of Africa in his two best known books (*The Invention of Africa*, 1988; and *The Idea of Africa*, 1994a) as an attempt at matricide. Meanwhile his consistent refusal to celebrate Africa as the self-evident focus of Black identity and even – in terms of Strong Afrocentrism – as the source of all human civilisation, might be interpreted as fratricide by the many African American, and African, Afrocentrists holding such views.<sup>542</sup> *I am inclined to read Mudimbe’s relation to historic African religion, and to Africa in general, in terms of yet a different myth: one which derives from the domain of African male puberty rites, and which amounts to the fact that the son dies vis-à-vis the mother, and the mother and her world vis-à-vis the son, at the moment that the son sets out to be initiated in the sacred forest access to which is forbidden to women.* His clerical education and subsequent clerical (albeit briefly) and Western intellectual career have constituted for Mudimbe an initiation by virtue of which historic African religion has died on him. It is as the familiar case of the priestly son from a humble rural family in the Roman Catholic, Southern regions of the Netherlands or in Belgium: he visits the house of his mother, and by virtue of his now incomparably elevated status – considered to have left an indelible mark on his soul at ordination – has become an exalted and condescending stranger there, rendered taboo by the almost untenable sacredness which his direct link with Rome and Heaven bestow upon him.<sup>543</sup>

<sup>541</sup> In itself, the Colonial Library is not so much about preserving past or present narratives, customs and knowledge as constituting a body or bodies having in their own right a particular quality inscribed in a given history, but about bringing together these

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<sup>541</sup> Part of the same quotation was used in footnote 497 when Mudimbe’s claim to ethnographic authority was presented.

<sup>542</sup> Berlinerblau 1999; Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.* 2000; Howe 1999. I have a contribution on the *Black Athena* debate in the second book, and defended Afrocentrism against the third book in van Binsbergen 2000a; also *cf.* van Binsbergen 2011b.

<sup>543</sup> It is this image applied to Matthijs Schoffeleers which I conjured up in my volume of poetry dedicated to him, *Braambos*, now incorporated in my *Verspreide Gedichten* (2015).

things and collapsing them in a 'primitive background' that a new universe (the colonial) and a new cosmology (conversion) can translate and transform into an advanced modernity. (...) it seems clear that both the Western *savoirs des simples* as well as the African invented primitive backgrounds could be understood as refused knowledges – that is, as the tragic necessity of an ill-known desire whose origin comes from elsewhere' (Mudimbe 1997: 176).

That is magnificently formulated, but it is also precisely what Mudimbe does to African historic religion: *reduce it to the status of 'refused knowledge'*.

Spending many pages to arrive at an original definition of religion which should be capable of capturing a finely tuned and critically purified 'primitive' religion characterised by the

'midnight zero qualities of ipse-ity' (Mudimbe 1997: 25),

Mudimbe never comes round to applying such a definition to Central Africa in order to identify and discuss forms of African historic religion there, but only describes the conversionist and unavoidably distorting appropriations of these forms in the hands of anthropologists, missionaries, and (in a process of creative retrodiction, by which they liberate and assert their difference) by African clerical and post-clerical intellectuals.

Admittedly, the fact that Mudimbe concentrates on varieties of Christianity and does scarcely touch on African historic religion, is to some extent a consequence of a theoretical position which includes Christianity and historic African religion alike:

'The reconversion – which is actually a rupture – from a psychological to a sociological model and then to Lévy-Bruhl's anthropological paradigm, exerts an influence upon the way we read the reality of African religions today. The traditional readings are not rendered as part of a cultural order *sui generis* but, indeed, as signs and proofs of something else, namely, epistemological categories unfolding from an intellectual configuration completely alien to the cultural spaces they claim to reflect' (Mudimbe 1997: 16).<sup>544</sup>

African historic religion does however enter the argument of *Tales of Faith* to the extent to which it was appropriated, by certain missionary authors, into Christianity, as a *preparatio Evangelii*, a stepping-stone towards the Gospel (Mudimbe 1997: 76 *f.*). Such liberation of the oppressed as the learned Cameroonian pastor Ela envisages through his missionary work among his fellow Cameroonians, takes local religious practices seriously and leads to a 'sometimes iconoclastic ambition' (Mudimbe 1997: 80) directed at the empty fetishes of missionary Christianity – but what goes unnoticed is the far greater iconoclasm that all but eclipsed African historic religion from visibility in Central Africa. The oppressed poor scarcely manage to summon Mudimbe's passion: distantly or even callously, he calls Ela's commitment to their cause 'fascinating' (Mudimbe 1997: 82)!

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<sup>544</sup> The same point is taken up again in detail (Mudimbe 1997: 159 *f.*). What this really says, depressingly (especially for someone with my track record), and in apparent defiance of Mudimbe's universalism, is that European text on African religion will always be alien and alienating.



When Mudimbe speaks of 'an incredible miracle' and identifies as an agnostic, he evokes the epistemological impossibility of religious belief as a rational position. St Augustine's *credo quia absurdum*, in Latin, would be a typical phrase for the post-clerical classicist Mudimbe, to embellish his French or English prose. Yet at least two points can be made in defence of African historic religion, so that it does not have to be crushed under the impact of allegedly universal epistemologies from the North Atlantic. The first point I shall explain by reference to common anthropological ethnocentrism in the study of African religion; the second point is made by Mudimbe himself, relying on de Certeau.

1. My first point is that Mudimbe's insistence on the incredible nature of both Christianity and African historic religion reiterates a position which is basically ethnocentric and hegemonic. Regrettably, that position coincides with that habitually taken in the anthropological study of African religion.

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

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

there is however a fourth type of statement which cultural anthropologist absolutely exclude from the question concerning truth:

- d. the participants' statement that their collective representations are a valid description of reality (both in its sensory and in its meta-sensory aspect, visible and invisible etc.).

Following the later Wittgenstein, Winch has show us that the truth of the latter type of statement cannot be established in general and universally, but depends on the language-specific, meaning-defining form of life which is at hand. Whether in a certain society witches do or do not exist, cannot be answered with the universal statement that witches do exist, or do not exist, but can only be answered by reference to the specific life-forms at hand in that society – and of such life forms there are always more than one at the same time and place (Winch 1970: 100 f.; Sogolo, 1993; Jarvie 1972). Now, cultural relativism as a central professional point of departure of classic anthropology may perhaps mean, theoretically, that the exclusion of this final category depends on respect for whatever is true in the other life form or cultural orientation; but in practice it nearly always comes down to following. However much the ethnographer has invested in the acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge so that local collective representations can be unsealed for her (or him, *etc.*), and however much

she gradually internalises these collective representations as a private person – in her professional formal utterances (in the forms of academic writing-up) she does not allow the collective representations she has studied the benefit of the doubt, nor the respect she pretends to be due to the collectively other.

The tacit point of departure of the cultural anthropological professional practice (and in this respect it does not distance itself from condescending and hegemonic North Atlantic society as a whole) is: *the collective representations of other societies under study cannot be true, unless they coincide one hundred percent with the collective representations of the researcher's own society of origin*. Of course, both the researcher's society of origin and the cultural orientation under study construct a truth-creating life world – which is a situation suggestive of a relativist approach. But according to the conventions of ethnography such a life world may be one-sidedly broken down if it is the other's life world, and left intact when it is the researcher's own. Just try to realise what this means for the confrontation, throughout the modern world, in institutional, political and media settings, between such major and powerful North Atlantic institutional complexes as democracy, medicine, education, Christianity, and pre-existing local alternatives in the respective fields (e.g. Islam!). Anthropologists may pay lip service to the local alternatives from a humanitarian and aesthetic point of view but –for their own sanity and professional survival they have to abide by the adage that *these alternatives cannot be true*. May I be permitted to try and objectify myself as an example:

N. FROM PARTICIPANT OBSERVER TO PARTICIPANT *TOUT COURT*: A EUROPEAN'S PATH THROUGH AFRICAN RELIGION. Born in the Netherlands (1947), I was trained at the Municipal University of my home town as an anthropologist specialising in religion. From my first field-work (1968), when I investigated saint worship and the ecstatic cult in rural North Africa, I have struggled with the problem of *the truth of the others' belief* – which I am inclined to consider as the central problem of interculturality. With gusto I sacrificed to the dead saints in their graves, danced along with the ecstatic dancers, experienced the beginning of mystical ecstasy myself, built an entire network of fictive kinsmen around me. Yet in my ethnography I reduced the very same people to numerical values in a quantitative analysis (cf. p. 176, above), and I knew of no better way to describe their religious representations than as the denial of North Atlantic or cosmopolitan natural science (van Binsbergen 1985b; 1980, 1985b). It was only twenty years later when, in the form of a novel (*Een Buik Openen – 'Opening up a Belly' – 1988*) I found the words to testify of my love for and indulgence in the North African life forms which I had had to keep at a distance as an ethnographer; and my two-volume, English-language book manuscript on this research is still lying idly on a shelf. In the course of many years and several African field-work locations, always operating in the religious and the therapeutic domain, I gradually began to realise that I loathed the cynical professional attitude of anthropology, and that I had increasingly difficulty sustaining that attitude. Who was I that I could afford to make believe, to pretend, whenever the undivided serious commitment of my research participants was involved? Several among them have played a decisive role in my life, as examples, teachers, spiritual masters, lovers. In Guinea-Bissau, in 1983, I did not remain the observer of the oracular priests but I became their patient – like nearly all the born members of the local society were. In the town of Francistown, Botswana, from 1988, under circum-

stances which I have discussed at length elsewhere (van Binsbergen 1991, 1998) – the usual professional routine for field-work became so insupportable to me that I had to throw overboard all methodological considerations. I became not only the patient of local diviner-priests (*sangomas*), but at the end of a long therapy course I ended up as one of them, and thus as a believer in the local collective representations. At the time I primarily justified this as a political deed, for me as a White man in an area which had been disrupted by White monopoly capitalism and by nearby South African *apartheid*. Now more than then I realise that it was also and primarily an epistemological position-taking – a revolt against the professional hypocrisy in which the hegemonic perspective of anthropology reveals itself. It was a position-taking which in fact expelled me from cultural anthropology (although I did go by my own choice) and which created the conditions for the step which I finally made when occupying my chair in intercultural philosophy.

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

2. *So far for the argument from intercultural epistemology. The second point is much shorter. According to de Certeau (quoted with great approval by Mudimbe) religion is not only thwarted epistemology but also action by which an incredible belief is rendered credible:*

The ambiguity of theological projects cannot but lead us back to an essential question: how can we comprehend the credibility of Christianity in the Third World? The late Michel de

Certeau notes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) that “the credibility of a discourse is what first makes believers act in accord with it. It produces practitioners. To make people believe is to make them act ... etc.” (Mudimbe 1997: 82 f.; de Certeau 1984: 148).

Mudimbe uses this convincing line of thought in relation to missionary Christianity, which is unmistakably incredible for the agnostic that he repeatedly professes to be at this point in his life, and which he claims to have been at least since his 1968 days at Paris-Nanterre.<sup>545</sup> But why does Mudimbe allow this explanation to apply exclusively to Christianity in Africa, and not to African historic religion which is *rendered credible in praxis* in essentially the same way?

Meanwhile an alternative interpretation presents itself for Mudimbe’s presumed bone cancer, its being an illusion based on misdiagnosis, the explosion of creativity in all his genres of text production (poetry, novel, essay in the philosophy of science), and the subsequent disappearance of the symptoms. Described thus, we have an event rendered in the global language of medical rationality (which however misfired, in this case) and academic and literary book production. I would read the case very differently as an African diviner-priest with forty years of experience in a cultural setting, the Nkoya people of Western Zambia, that has strong cultural, migratory and linguistic links with the Luba people from Congo (with whom Mudimbe identifies on his mother’s side). In the cosmology of Central Africa, bones constitute the ancestors’ coagulated sperm, which may be symbolised as white beads, or as a diviner’s divinatory bones on which diagnosis is based. Having converted lock, stock and barrel to an alien world-view, to clerical intellectualism of a global signature and North Atlantic orientation, Mudimbe’s ancestral heritage could be said to be dying – culturally in the sense that beyond the Luba and possibly Songye language he allowed hardly anything of the ancestral culture to remain part of his life, and physically in that his very bones were giving signs of literally decaying. However, his conversion to Christianity was not an illusion but a fact, and it allowed him to tap – through the act of textual creation – such vital spiritual and physical resources at transformation and reconstruction of self, as were residing in another, at least equally powerful world-view, the one to which he had converted. And there the true (although incredible) miracle happened: the bone cancer which at one stage may have been not an illusion based on misdiagnosis, but a fact, was arrested by the creative transformation which Mudimbe unleashed in these five months; what had been alienation from an ancestral heritage until then had become an authentic source of life; and he survived to become the most successful, famous, profound and heroic representative of the new category of cultural converts which make up a sizeable

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‘At Nanterre (...) I did not hide the fact that I was then a practicing Catholic, although, philosophically, agnostic.’ (Mudimbe 1991a: ix). He is unlikely to have been an agnostic when he stayed at the Catholic seminary of Mwera near Lubumbashi in the early 1960s, or when he entered a Rwandan Benedictine convent as a novice, but from the latter he soon resigned (Mudimbe 1997: 137); cf. also Mudimbe 1991a: 125, where he characterises the Benedictine episode as, ‘my brief sojourn’.

proportion of today's African intellectuals, a veritable *métis*.

If African historic religion is no longer the dominant cohesive social force in the urban and intellectual context of Kinshasa, Lubumbashi and other Congolese cities, this does not mean that such religion has entirely disappeared from the present-day Congolese social life in the rural areas; in the last few decades, ethnographic research by accomplished ethnographers like Devisch and de Boeck has demonstrated its continued vitality and viability.<sup>546</sup>

If African historic religion has succeeded to survive to some extent in the countryside of Central Africa, why is it far less conspicuous in the big cities? Like in Belgium, Roman Catholicism was something of a state religion in Belgian Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. This does not mean that there is a 100% overlap between the religious and the state domain; for as Mudimbe acknowledges that the Central African colonies, like Belgium, had a certain plurality of European ideological expressions (Protestantism, Freemasonry, and one may add socialism) more or less rival to Roman Catholicism, and some of them with rather disproportionately great power in national politics. However, the effect of the practical coinciding of state and world religion is a particular political situation, which has a direct bearing on the eclipse of religious alternatives to Roman Catholicism from public and even private life. There is a constant reinforcing between state and religious sanctioning in the policing of citizen's everyday life. The state, which in its twentieth century CE form is primarily a democratically legitimated oligarchy, assumes reality partly through the citizen's submission to and veneration of the representations of the church; and the intangible sanctions of the church somehow receive a vicarious backing from the display of physical force (the prison, the police, the army) and the powerful bureaucratic procedures proper to the state. The Enlightenment rationality of the modern state nicely matches the verbose doctrinal and organisational rationalisations of Roman Catholic theology. The result of all this is that in the consciousness and practices of the citizens all heterodoxy tends to be shunned as criminal and as an act of national treason, by virtue of strongly internalised modes of assessment, self-control, and domestication. In everyday Belgian life especially outside the big cities, even Protestantism would be seen in this heterodox light, and so were the expressions of 'paganism', be they European, African, or from a different extraction. (For that very same reason they also invited common fascination as expressions of defiance of a paternalistic, unaccountable, and increasingly inefficient state, as *e.g.* the Dutroux affair, the Nijvel gang,<sup>547</sup> and even the middle- and upper-class appeal of Freema-

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<sup>546</sup> de Boeck 1991a; de Boeck & Devisch 1994; Devisch 1984; 1986; 1991; Devisch & Brodeur 1999.

<sup>547</sup> In the 1990s, the small North-West European country of Belgium (Congo's former colonial motherland) was in the clutches of horrific fascination with the child torturer and murderer Dutroux and his wife, operating in the city of Liège, Slightly earlier, a mysterious terror group popularly dubbed 'the Nijvel gang' and reputedly counting police officers among its members, exercised a reign of terror over the town of Nijvel and its surroundings.

sorry would suggest). Heterodoxy instils the ordinary law-abiding citizen with a sense of horror and especially shame, comparable to the shame adults feel in cases of imperfect public concealment of their own bodily functions (signs of incontinence, of menstruation leaking through, *etc.*). In a system of evaluation along such axes as child versus adult, animal versus human, stupid versus intelligent, upper class versus lower class, exclusion versus inclusion, punishment versus reward, heterodoxy thus installs itself on the negative end. Mudimbe is as good a guide as any critic of colonialism to identify these social pressures towards compliance with world-religion orthodoxy, but it is important to realise that these pressures are not limited to the colonial situation. They can still be seen to work in post-colonial African societies: among the citizens as a mode of acquiescence; whereas among the political elite the semi-secret semi-public display of heterodox horrors (for instance in the occasional display of violence, sorcery, cannibalism and human sacrifice for magical purposes, *e.g.* towards an electoral victory) reinforces such acquiescence, since these horrors are profoundly threatening to the citizens (Toulabor 2000). Therefore, in the public culture of Central Africa from at least the middle of the twentieth century CE if not earlier, much like in the public culture of Botswana, considerable sections of the population (especially the urbanites and middle classes) are effectively shielded off from African historic religion by a screen of internalised shame. In Zambia in the early 1970s I detected (as a younger and less sensitive observer) nothing similar, but over the past forty years I have seen the gradual installation of a precisely such a screen. Today this altered state of affairs occasionally makes me appear a social fool in that country: when unthinkingly I am tempted to publicly mediate – through the display of my beads, and through my *sangoma*-related overt discourse – a historic African religious identity; I thus demonstrate that I am one who has obviously not permanently resided in the country recently, whose main Zambian identity was formed in the rural areas of Western Zambia in the early 1970s when African historic religion was still a dominant idiom there, who subsequently became a diviner-priest in Botswana according to a religious idiom which meanwhile has gained some currency in Zambia as well, and therefore someone who does not always realise that it is no longer socially acceptable to mediate African historic religion in the public space of the town and the open road.

One may wonder why Mudimbe should stop, like he does, at the evocation of the few heroes and saints of the cultural mutant order of clerical intellectualism (Kagame, Ki-Zerbo, Mulago, Mveng), and scarcely traces the subsequent consolidation of that mutant order throughout Central African society in the second half of the twentieth century CE. With the general spread of formal education (however low its level), and the prominence of clerical intellectuals in the educational system, one would suppose that the main conditions were set for the percolation of (admittedly: attenuated, compromised, versions of) this mutant order far outside the seminaries, convents and universities where it was originally engendered, to become, perhaps, the standard cultural orienta-

tion among tens of thousands, possibly hundreds of thousand of people of the urban middle class in Central Africa. Did this happen? If it did, how did this influence the political and religious itinerary of the societies of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi in the second half of the twentieth century? If it did, how did it help to explain Mobutuism, its politics of authenticity (which, much like clerical intellectualism, amounted to a virtualisation and thus effectively an annihilation of historical African cultural and religion), the specific form of proliferation of church organisations which took place in Congo, and the general emergence of a modern social order in which Christianity and literacy have become the norm, and African historic religion has been eclipsed or at best has gone underground, mainly to emerge in highly selective and virtualised form in certain practices of African Independent Churches (as well as in a travesty, in middle-class and upper-class modern magic). Is perhaps the violence (more specifically the death) which forms the refrain of Mudimbe's spiritual itinerary, and which I am inclined to interpret as, among many other possible referents, *the parricidal murder on African historic religion*, akin to the extreme and extremely massive violence which has swept Congo, Burundi and Rwanda throughout the second half of the twentieth century CE? Anthropologists like Devisch and my former PhD student Danielle de Lame have struggled with the interpretation of the latter form of violence in Central Africa (Devisch 1996, 1995a; de Lame 1996), and their interpretations, while adding a social scientific dimension to the psychoanalytical and philosophical hermeneutics of Mudimbe, certainly do ring somewhat naïve in the light of Mudimbe's essayistic philosophising, although the latter does lack sociological imagination and manifests the literature scholar's disinclination to think in terms of large-scale and enduring social categories, structural relations, and institutions.

We might yet take seriously Mudimbe's claim that *Tales of Faith* is about any post-colonial individual (Mudimbe 1997: 198), and not just about himself and a handful of fellow clerical and post-clerical intellectuals from Central Africa. Despite his exceptional erudition, cosmopolitan orientation, and unprecedented success, Mudimbe's predicament is to a considerable extent that of the modern Central African middle classes in general. A glimpse of what lies at today's far end of the itinerary that started with Kagame c.s., may be gathered from the following impression, which I owe entirely to Julie Duran-Ndaya's PhD research under my supervision:<sup>548</sup>

O. GLIMPSES OF *LE COMBAT SPIRITUEL* IN PRESENT-DAY CONGO (AFTER JULIE NDAYA). In July, 2000, Kinshasa was the scene of a major church conference of the Combat Spirituel (Spiritual Combat) movement. The conference involved close to 20,000 people, many of whom have travelled to Kinshasa from Western Europe and other places of the Congolese diaspora. Obviously we are dealing here with a highly significant social phenomenon at a massive scale. The movement caters for upper-middle class and professional people, especially women. Women also play leading roles in the move-

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<sup>548</sup> This passage based on Duran-Ndaya 1999, cf. Ndaya 2008.

ment's organisation. The movement's doctrine and ritual combine an original re-reading of the Bible with techniques of self-discovery and self-realisation under the direction of female leaders. The spiritual battle which members have to engage in, is a struggle for self-realisation in the face of any kind of negations or repressions of personal identity, especially such as are often the fate of ambitious middle-class women in diasporic situations. In order to achieve this desired self-realisation, it is imperative that all existing ties with the past, as embodied in the traditional cultural norms of historic Central African society, and as represented by the (male) ancestors, are literally trampled underfoot. Thus a major part of regular church ritual is to go through the motions of vomiting upon evocations of the ancestors, and of violently and repeatedly stamping upon their representations. The catharsis which this is to bring about is supposed to prepare one for the modern, hostile globalised world. Some members experience very great difficulty in thus having to violently exorcise figures and symbols of authority and identity, which even in the diffuse, virtualised kinship structure of urban Congolese society today have been held in considerable respect. But while this predicament suggests at least some resilience of historic African religion (otherwise there would be no hesitation at trampling on the past and the ancestors),<sup>549</sup> it is practically

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<sup>549</sup> On second thoughts, I wonder whether the trampling on ancestral representations must necessarily be understood as an unequivocal act of disrespect and rejection (as it would be in North Atlantic eyes), and could not *originate*, at least, in a positive spiritual expression in its own right. The linguistic, cultural and historical continuities between Congo and Botswana, North and South of Zambia respectively, are very considerable and extend even to shared trans-continental influences from South Asia – although what I learned in decades of Zambian fieldwork (the matrilineal and often effectively ambilineal, undercurrent in Zambian life, with the numerous multiple, parallel and intersecting kin ramifications its produces between people over a very extensive social and geographical field, with the general impression of intoxicating unbounded resourcefulness, possibilities, joking and manipulability) proved much easier to apply in a Congolese diasporic environment (in Europe – I have never been to Congo) than in the emphatically patrilineal, formal, paternalistic and restrictive Botswana social milieu of speakers of Tswana, Kalanga and Ndebele, with its firm socio-cultural boundaries, its several millennia of exposure to long-distance trade, and its lack of flexibility and of humour. Anyway, in the light of such qualified continuity, I cannot help making the observation that in various Botswana settings, the human act of trampling the earth (I may be forgiven for hearing echoes of geomancy here, cf. Fig. 5.1 above, and van Binsbergen 2011: 228, with Ancient Egyptian and Coptic parallels, also cf. *Exodus* 17:6 f.) is at least ambivalent, and predominantly positive: a sign of respect and of acknowledgment of the living's dependence on the dead. The idea has a much wider application: who wants to draw the attention of the Earth as a repository of ancient power, has to strike it; thus in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (Fontenrose 1980 / 1959: 72, Homer 1914 / 7<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) the Greek goddess Hera, furious that her husband Zeus had parthenogenetically produced a child (Athena, born when Hephaistos *hammered* upon Zeus' head!), strikes the earth with her flat hand and calls upon Heaven, Earth, and the Titans, to grant her a similar privilege – and the result was Typhaon or Typhon, Apollo's great adversary at the site of Delphi; by the same token, the earth is forcefully opened to make an exit for Kore / Persephone, Demeter's daughter and Hades' captured spouse (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 1 – Homer 1914 / 7<sup>th</sup> c. BCE; Kerenyi 1969; Fauth 1979c). A forceful stamping movement (leading, as I found to my own detriment, to injury if executed for hours on the concrete floors now standard in Botswana housing) is the main element in *sangoma* dancing, and one that is constantly emphasised in *sangoma* training – supposed to call forth the ancestors whose main dwelling place is under the surface of both the earth and of natural waters. The same movement is seen in Tswana traditional dances which are taught at primary and secondary schools, and performed by many dancing troops in the country. When my close friends, a Christian couple of two highly-educated members of the Botswana upper middle class, brought me along to visit their parents'



impossible for diasporic Congolese to tap, for further spiritual guidance, the resources of historic African religion in the form of divination, therapy and protective medicine: in the years 2000s, for instance, not one reliable and qualified Congolese specialist in historic African religion (*nganga*) appeared to be found in The Netherlands or Belgium.

The make-up of this topical situation is reminiscent of that of the clerical intellectual mutation proclaimed by Mudimbe half a century ago: the literate and Christian format appropriated as self-evident yet subjected to personal selective transformation, the rejection of an ancestral past and of African traditional religion, the total inability to derive any spiritual resources from the latter, and the effect of being propelled into a mutant cosmopolitan cultural and spiritual solution which is African by the adherent original geography and biology, but not in substance.

Perhaps it is illuminating to conclude with a perspective that combines universalism and particularism: a tracing of the surprising parallels that, from two so very parts of the globe, seem to be manifested in the lives of Mudimbe and myself (cf. van Binsbergen 2015).

### **12.11. A comparison between Mudimbe's itinerary and my own**

My own intellectual itinerary started out from a different but similar initial position from Mudimbe's, for a long time ran parallel to his, but precisely with regard to African historic religion reached the opposite outcome, largely because that form of religion was not part of my historic cultural heritage as it might have been of his.

Mudimbe is a capable, creative and courageous thinker – one who can stand the vertigo of high anxiety, being fundamentally homeless and alone without other illusions than the quest for a placeless science and truth. To him, the rest is 'incredible', is *belles lettres*. Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith* amount to an 'act of faith' in the sense of its literal Spanish equivalent, the *auto-da-fé*, the most terrible destructive act to which Roman Catholicism as a regime of control turned out to be capable of in the context of the Early Modern conquest of the New World. The mutation which produced clerical intellectualism and thus gave us Mudimbe, was also an *auto da-fé*, serving to eradicate historic African religion

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graves at the Southern Botswana traditional town of Kanye, they did not – for they were emphatically Christian – bring any water, liquor, meal, meat, meatstock or calico (which well into the colonial era constituted standard ancestral offerings in Zambia and Botswana), but they did make a point of repeatedly trampling and stamping on the graves – as a form of communication, rather than as a sign of disrespect. Could it be that the trampling within *Le Combat Spirituel*, even though now meant as a transgressive negative act symbolically equivalent to vomiting, is in its *pejorative interpretation of today* yet a transformation of a bodily expression that historically may have constituted a *positive* cult, even in Congo? Such redefinition of function and meaning while the overt behaviour in question remains more or less unaltered, is very typical of religious change under conditions of (proto-)globalisation.

from visibility and accessibility in Central African life today.

Like Mudimbe, I started out in life (1947) from a global periphery, in my case an urban slum in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Like Mudimbe, I owed my excellent secondary education to the Roman Catholic Church mission (which was active in the slum by operating a community centre and chapple), was a choir boy, and soon internalised the primacy of literate text production which is implied in such a situation by writing poetry at a professional, publishable level of accomplishment. Like Mudimbe, I shed whatever ancestral culture I could have inherited. I did so because, like Mudimbe, I was co-opted into a higher social class with a much more open window on globally circulating culture; and in my case there was an additional reason which may or may not have obtained in Mudimbe's case: the terror of physical and sexual violence which my father exercised over the family in which I grew up, and my mother's ambiguous attitude concerning this state of affairs, installed (far beyond a Western boy's normal Oedipal tendencies) parricide as my central conscious desire ever since I was seven years old – the main topic also of my prayer requests to God, and perhaps still the unconscious drive of my excessively critical polemic style in academic writing and literary criticism. A rejection of my father's urban slum culture was the main socially accepted means of carrying out such parricide. Like Mudimbe, I became a student, an accomplished practitioner, and a philosophical critic of colonial and post-colonial anthropology. Even though, like in Mudimbe's case, the Roman Catholic Church provided the main venue of secondary education and globally circulating refined civilised culture (*belles lettres*, classical music, in general the tastes and styles of the polite global public), there was no need for me to pursue the priesthood: not only had I lost my once ardent faith when fifteen year old, but also, as I was nearing graduation from secondary school, a large number of academic and other career opportunities opened up for me in a democratic, complex urban North Atlantic society eagerly expanding the ranks of its middle classes by co-optation from among the working classes. However, with a headstart on me of half a generation, my half-brother had started on an ecclesiastic career soon abortive, and for others from the rural and Roman Catholic South of the Netherlands (like my friend and – after Boissevain, Köbben and van Velsen – final PhD supervisor Matthew Schoffeleers) this was the obvious road to social and cultural upward mobility – as it was for Mudimbe in colonial and early post-colonial Congo.

Without much noticeable bitterness, deliberately refusing to proceed to parricide *vis-à-vis* his European superiors and the ideals of culture and scholarship they stood for, Mudimbe emancipated from an abortive ecclesiastic career in order to become a post-clerical intellectual, first in France, subsequently back in Congo and finally in the United States, increasingly consolidating the post-African global cultural mutation which he and his peers represented.

My own itinerary through academia, though also marked with early successes,

and displaying the same lack of anticlerical resentment combined with total agnosticism, was far less than Mudimbe's a successful retreat into a largely self-constructed, universalist, and thoroughly cherished, global home. On the contrary, my career had its insecurities, doubts, conflicts, and ruptures. Anthropology, and scientific rationality in general (partly under the influence of my first wife, a physicist) unleashed an indefatigable passion in me from the first moment I, as a third-year student, was prompted to combine theoretical analysis with empirical field-work; yet, strangely enough, throughout the 1970s and 1980s my first subjective identity remained that of a poet and a literary prose writer, who approached his academic writing with cynicism as a form of routinised production inherently incapable of redemption or truth; who constantly defied the conventions of polite academic life in frequent attempts at fratricide and parricide, wasting three other academic supervisors before finally defending my PhD thesis on *Religious Change in Zambia* under the aegis of an ex-missionary who had been part of Mudimbe's Central African intellectual scene himself, Matthew Schoffeleers; while I proved incapable of maintaining, existentially, religiously, amorously, a healthy objectifying distance as an anthropologist in the field. This culminated in the early 1990s, when in the course of field-work into the culture of a North-Eastern Botswana boom town (Francistown) as a meeting place between the African historic culture and globally mediated culture, I was finally (after social but not religious adoption as a Nkoya in Zambia) given an African spiritual home, in the course of a long and painful therapy within the idiom of one of the dominant spiritual expressions in that part of the world – at the end of which I came out as a practising *sangoma*.

My emphatic testifying to this step in professional and public contexts made clear that it was not just another field-work strategy in the pursuit of secret information, but a deliberate denial of the objectifying, implicitly hegemonic rationality of anthropology – in other words, parricide. This triggered a series of further intellectual dislocations. My Marxist-inspired structural-functionalism gave way to a highly unpopular search for comprehensive connections in space and time, linking the Southern African divination system I had been trained in as a *sangoma*, to the magic and science of West Africa, Islam, Ancient Greece, the Ancient Near East, South Asia, and China. I joined the *Black Athena* debate, began to explore its implications for our image of Africa, revived my initial identity as a Mediterraneanist, and as an Africanist increasingly identified as a supporter and defender of Afrocentrism. All this required me to effectively leave behind me anthropology and Central African religious history and my patrons in these fields (a further parricide) and to take up or resume philological, historical, and epistemological studies, Assyriology, Egyptology, archaeology, astronomy even, far beyond the paradigmatic and geographical parochialism of my earlier Africanist anthropology. While my becoming a *sangoma* had been an intuitive and highly emotional gesture, I struggled to gradually bring out its epistemological and knowledge-political implications. From

an anthropologist, I became a philosopher, eligible to the Rotterdam chair of intercultural philosophy; needless to say that my predecessor gave highly vocal and decisively destructive signs of experiencing my succession (and the inimitable tone of my inaugural in that connection...) as parricidal – although I had never been his student. When this Chapter was originally written (2001), the Rotterdam position continued to be combined with empirical Africanist anthropological research at Leiden, poetry and *sangoma*-hood, both at my Haarlem home in the Netherlands (where I frequent the *sangoma* shrine and other shrines in my backyard) and when in Africa. Complex struggles seek to attune these identities to the role expectations and existential predicaments of Dutch-Belgian family life. Meanwhile, as indicated, already in the course of the 1970s I was granted another African social home as adoptive son of two classificatory fathers: Mwene (= King) Kahare Kabambi and Mwene Shumbanyama, both of the Nkoya people of Zambia, a Luba-related group among whom I have done research since the early 1970s.

Both Mudimbe and myself have ended up, from socially very peripheral points of departure, in a secure and prominent North Atlantic position, cherishing the comforting qualified universalism that comes with academia, philosophy, classics, *belles lettres*. For Mudimbe, the African heritage that was never to be his (because the ‘micropolitics’ – Foucault – of clerical education denied him access to and accomplishment in African historic religion) continues to intrigue him. He has made it his life’s work to pinpoint the intellectual history and philosophical implications of these micropolitics, and to define, critique and increasingly control through his writings and his administrative appointments, how the image of Africa has been constructed and should be deconstructed. He has become the most qualified, almost plenipotentiary censor of his own spiritual and cultural loss as a post-African. For him, the Africa of historic local religious forms is a domain of the imaginary, of make-believe: fable, tale, myth, performance *etc.*

I feel that Mudimbe is stating only one side of the story. He has fallen victim to what we might call the deceptive politics of translocalisation, much as I have fallen victim to the deceptive politics of locality by becoming and remaining a *sangoma*.<sup>550</sup> The gods I pray to in a loosely African fashion (some of them as particularistic as my own or my patients’ ancestors, others tending to universality such as Mwali, or the Virgin Mary, or the God whose mother she is) do not need an epistemological validation because the rite turns them from imaginary into real: into social facts which make a difference because they inform the behaviour of sizeable sets of people, and probably even into material facts, occasionally.

There is one point in *Tales of Faith* where Mudimbe comes close to articulating and analysing a trajectory similar to my own: when he discusses the French Jesuit missionary de Rosny who after a quarter of a century of work in Cameroon published a famous book on his initiation there as a diviner-priest (*nganga*) (Rosny 1981, 1992: 31 f.):

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<sup>550</sup> Cf. Appadurai 1995; de Jong 2001; van Dijk & Pels 1996; van Binsbergen 1991, 1988, 2003b.

“There is more: “and yourself, he told me one day, what do you think of all that?” The French Jesuit could not but have perceived what this invitation from a friend was possibly echoing and its religious value. Indeed, there is little evidence in calling upon a connection between this invitation and Jesus’ question to his disciples about himself: “and you, he said to them, what do you think about me?”<sup>551</sup> It is the coincidence of points of view here that constitutes an interesting symbolic challenge: an invitation from outside, a *vox clamans in deserto*, a voice coming from the wilderness of the unknown; and, on the other side, an expectation, a *fides* or faith facing and uncovering the unbelievable rationality of an unknown system, of a revelation. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes apropos such a mysterious call:

“The other is called forth to where there is neither subject nor signification. It is the wilderness of pleasure, or of joy. It is not desolate even if it is arid. It is neither desolate nor consoled. It is beyond either laughter or tears.

‘But still, don’t you have to concede – and you seemed to have done so at one point – that voice is first uttered in tears?’

‘That’s true, that’s the birth of tragedy. But what comes before that birth is the delivery of voice and it is not yet tragic. Those are tears and cries which know nothing of tragedy or comedy’ (Mudimbe 1997: 32, quoting Nancy 1993: 246).

Mudimbe remains remarkably aloof in his comments here, not prepared to make a substantial statement about the forms of African historic religion to which de Rosny was unmistakably introduced, but instead he invokes the unbelievable rationality of an unknown system (unknown to whom? not to de Rosny any more, nor to his Cameroonian interlocutor, but to Mudimbe and to the textual genre of the North-Atlantic philosophical essay that he pursues),

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<sup>551</sup> This unreferenced Bible quotation appears to be slightly corrupt, as befits an ex-Roman Catholic (people of that persuasion tend to read the Bible more eclectically and sparingly than many other Christians), especially a Roman Catholic proclaimed agnostic who is a post-clerical intellectual, even if a classicist at the same time. Cf. *Matthew* 22:41-42:

Συνημένον δὲ τῶν Φαρισαίων\*, ἐπηρώτησεν αὐτοὺς ὁ Ἰησοῦς, λέγων· τί ὑμῖν δοκεῖ περὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ; τίνος υἱός ἐστιν; λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· τοῦ Δαυεὶδ. Λέγει αὐτοῖς· πῶς οὖν Δαυεὶδ ἐν

‘While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, 42 Saying, What think ye of Christ? whose son is he? They say unto him, The son of David.’

So the question was not asked from the disciples, but from the Pharisees. Or alternatively *Acts* 13:25: τῶμα μετανοίας παντὶ τῷ λαῷ Ἰσραήλ. Ὡς δὲ ἐπλήρου Ἰωάννης\* τὸν θρόνον, ἔλεγεν· τί ἐμὲ ὑπονοεῖτε εἶναι; οὐκ εἰμι ἐγὼ, ἀλλ’ ἰδοὺ, ἔρχεται μετ’ ἐμῆ, οὗ οὐκ εἰμι ἄξιος τὸ ὑπόδημα τῶν ποδῶν λῦσαι.

‘And as John fulfilled his course, he said, Whom think ye that I am? I am not he. But, behold, there cometh one after me, whose shoes of his feet I am not worthy to loose’.

But there may be more here than meets the eye. For I have occasionally noticed how Mudimbe, when he feels that he is being called upon to solemnly use his prophetic voice (e.g. in his contribution – Mudimbe 2011 – to Devisch & Nyamnjoh 2011), may be tempted to use words which the Gospels attribute to Jesus himself – as if in the face of the achievements of African *clerical intellectualism*, it would be facetious to try and maintain a distinction between him and the prophet of Christianity, and between these two and their Heavenly Father. Another form of parricide? Or the paroxysm of identification, which is the opposite?

'a voice crying in the wilderness',<sup>552</sup>

and Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872 / 1930). Mudimbe appears to be prepared to take recourse to anything, if only it safely belongs to the North Atlantic intellectual canon, and if only it can save us from having to think or act beyond the dogma of the defective epistemological status accorded to African historic religion, beyond its nature as certified to be incredible. And at this point in his text, he rushes on to speak of something else. So let me, too, do just that, in conclusion of this long and difficult Chapter:

*Performance is more than the liberation of difference for difference's sake. It is the creation of a world which, while man-made and make-believe, yet takes on a logic and a relevance of its own, reshaping the contingencies of life into a place to inhabit, to cherish, and to heal. Religion is more than a definitional exercise, more than a defective epistemology bringing us to believe the incredible. It is the symbolic transformation through which the locality created by performance, is kept alive so that it may issue life, even in death and through death. And politics is more than ethnocentric textual comments produced in order to keep North-South hegemony in place (as Mudimbe defines politics): it is also the parochial struggle over meaning and resources which make up the smaller, local universe, turning it into vital locality. African spirituality,<sup>553</sup> whether historic or Christian or Islamic or syncretistic, is a social technology of sociability, whose forms create meaning, power and healing regardless of the Western epistemological status of its alleged dogmas and of the supernatural entities featuring therein.*

Such instances of conversion as de Rosny's and my own appear<sup>554</sup> to go against

<sup>552</sup> Cf. 'For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' (*Matthew* 3:3).

<sup>553</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen 2003c, reprinted in the present book as Chapter 8.

<sup>554</sup> Some elaboration is in order here, although the question is far too complex to be threshed out here in full. When the original SOAS session of February 2001 was repeated in May 2001 and this time in the presence of Mudimbe himself, he contributed (approximately) the following statement to the discussion:

'The point is that in religious matters, Wim [ van Binsbergen ] is a believer whereas I am not.'

I did not quite recognise myself in this statement, but I must admit that I have not systematically and unequivocally avoided to give the impression that I do 'believe' (in the North Atlantic formal conception of *believing*) in the objective, sentient and conscious existence, of the ancestors after death, of the High God, of the spirits of the wilds, of the possession agents in such Central African cults of affliction as *Bituma*, *Muba*, *Nzila*, etc. Such a conception of religious belief springs from the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic, logocentric scholarly tradition, where the test of belief is defined as

- a. the volitional act of explicitly pronouncing one's acceptance of certain cognitive tenets of the faith (e.g. the Islamic *الشهادة* *aš-šahāda*, the Christian *Act of Faith*, or the Jewish public confirmation as *בר מצווה* *Bar Mitsva*, and not
- b. the act of sociability *vis-à-vis* other believers as fellow-members of a community

the course of hegemonic history, and to form a genuine challenge for the self-congratulatory mildness with which Mudimbe depicts the project of clerical and post-clerical intellectualism in Central Africa, taking for granted the very impasse in which he has ended up and from which he appears to be incapable of escaping: *North Atlantic universalising academic rationality, and the death of African historic religion.*

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brought into existence by joint ritual among other factors (such as co-residence, co-production, shared political institutions, shared myths, etc.).

As I have argued on several occasions (e.g. van Binsbergen 1981a (that paper is now being reprinted in my book in the press (a) ), 2003c (reprinted in the present volume as Chapter 8), and 2003b: *passim*), and as I will argue at greater length in *Sangoma Science*, in many contexts of popular religion of which I have first-hand knowledge (be they located in sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, South Asia, South East Asia, East Asia) the criterium of religious belonging is *not* some explicit cognitive statement but *de facto* participation, i.e. sociability. *Mainly* in this respect am I a believer in the worldview and spiritual beings venerated in ancestral cults and cults of affliction in which I have participated, till this very day, in South Central and Southern Africa. *Mainly* – for the tricky thing (wholly inexplicable from dominant North Atlantic ontologies and epistemologies) is that the ritual participation not only secondarily affirms but also effectively creates, in the first place, the spiritual beings, who then subsequently may (and often do) act upon the human reality of the senses as if their *v i r t u a l* existence has oscillated into real existence. But this should not be a mind-boggling give-away point towards the end of a book – to substantiate it, an entire book in its own right is required. As a senior North Atlantic intellectual I cannot afford to affirm the objective reality of African spiritual beings, so much is understood; yet what I have just explained amounts to a declaration, on my part, and based on extensive subjective experience, that I do subscribe, do 'believe' if you wish, in an *African ontology according to which spiritual beings do exist in so far as they are the objects of a cult.*





***Part V. Inside African knowledge  
systems***

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## Chapter 13

# The underpinning of scientific knowledge systems: Epistemology or hegemonic power?

## The implications of Sandra Harding's critique of North-Atlantic science for the appreciation of African knowledge systems

*The idea that North-Atlantic science is of an incomparable higher order than other local knowledges world-wide typically forms part of Eurocentrism and European expansionism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries CE. Cultural relativism emerged in the middle of the twentieth century as the Northern intellectual reaction against colonial subjugation, and as the self-evident implication of the theory of the internal systematics of local cultural orientations such as was supported by prolonged anthropological field-work within one narrowly circumscribed local community. To declare all science including North-Atlantic science to be merely ethno-science is an act of cognitive relativism. From that relativistic perspective the internal epistemology of North-Atlantic science (the claims of objectivity, relativity and universality) was declared to constitute a hegemonic myth. Although Harding, under reference to specific studies, contributes much to an understanding of the socio-cultural, political and historical factors because of which such claims could establish themselves, in fact she rejects the strong relativism implied in that position: if we deduct all socio-cultural, political and historical factors, and wholeheartedly admit that North-Atlantic science is a knowledge system that to a considerable extent has been determined by North Atlantic society and its history, then it still turns out that North-Atlantic scientific knowledge is largely valid knowledge, for reasons which cannot be reduced to hegemonic over-determination but which instead simply lie enshrined in the internal epistemology that stipulates scientific procedures through which manifestly valid knowledge can be obtained. Thus Harding ends up in a position which, from a very different point of departure and along a very different argument, has been defended for a considerable period of time by Gellner and his Anti-Relativist School (cf. Gellner 1959, 1970, 1990 / 1985; Hall & Jarvie 1996).*

### 13.1. Introduction

According to common views, which we shall critically examine in the course of this Chapter but will not fundamentally reject, North Atlantic science is a repository of valid knowledge about nature.

However, it is out of the question that North Atlantic science has the monopoly of valid knowledge about nature. Every human community, wherever in the world and at whatever period of time, that manages to survive for more than a few years and that is not totally parasitic upon other such communities, unmistakably possesses the means that enable its members to engage in effective extraction from nature (resulting in food, shelter *etc.*) on the basis of valid knowledge about nature.

To the extent to which they enable their members to engage in effective extraction from nature, most societies outside the North Atlantic region, including most if not all African societies, are therefore repositories of valid knowledge about non-human reality. In principle their knowledge about non-human reality is comparable with North Atlantic science, and of comparable effectiveness.

In addition to knowledge about non-human reality, every society comprises an elaborate system of knowledge about man-made symbols, classifications, norms, representations, institutions – both those of the members of that society itself, and (to a more limited extent) those of surrounding societies and societies of the past. Let us call such knowledge ‘societal knowledge’. This societal knowledge deserves to be called ‘valid’ if it enables a member of the society (even a temporary member, such as an anthropologist, an Islamic or Christian missionary, or trader) to act in a socially recognised and hence effective way within that society. However, this type of valid societal knowledge is not about nature, and since it is intimately tied up with the socio-cultural constructs humans within a given local society have more or less agreed upon, it may be safely assumed to have no compelling validity outside the boundaries (however blurred and situational) of that society in question.<sup>555</sup>

The valid knowledge which any society has about nature and which enables its members to engage in effective extraction from nature, is usually not stored in the abstract, specialised format characteristic of North Atlantic science; it

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<sup>555</sup> Of course, this is not to imply that, by contrast, a society’s knowledge about *nature* has *ipso facto* validity *outside* that society’s boundaries. Starting out with the classic and still useful (if no longer altogether up-to-date, cf. Gettier 1963; Moser 1993) definition of knowledge as ‘justified true belief’, elsewhere I present an argument to the effect that we can easily identify such justified true belief within any one given society, but that it is very difficult, if not practically impossible, to assess the justified and true nature of beliefs from one culturally constructed life-world to another; cf. van Binsbergen 2003b: Ch. 7. We could see, in this dilemma, a ground for cultural and epistemological relativism; but I would rather suggest that this dilemma shows that we need a different definition of knowledge – one that is wisdom-orientated.

tends, by contrast, to be embedded in two other formats: in directions (often not even verbal) for practical action, and in complex religious representations, saturated with symbolism, in such a way that these representations tend to have considerable (but never total)<sup>556</sup> overlap with local societal knowledge as defined above. For this type of cognitive systems comprising knowledge about nature, cultural anthropology has coined the term 'ethno-science'<sup>557</sup> i.e. a strictly local form of knowledge about nature tied closely (but not necessarily absolutely) to the social and cultural orientation of the people or ethnic group managing that knowledge.

Because of its being intertwined with local societal knowledge including beliefs, representations and symbolism, and because of its specific form – a form characterised by Lévi-Strauss by such terms as 'pensée sauvage'<sup>558</sup> ('primitive thought') and 'la science du concret' ('the science of what is concrete') – which differs greatly from that of North Atlantic science, it is in general very difficult to isolate, from among these local systems of knowledge, that which is just

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<sup>556</sup> 'Never total': this is a time-honoured contention of classic anthropologists (e.g. Malinowski 1954/ 1948; Evans-Pritchard 1972 / 1937; Gluckman 1955) who studied systems of knowledge outside the North Atlantic region and stressed the considerable rationality and practicality of local systems of production, medicine, etc., which in pre-classic anthropology would tend to be entirely relegated to the fields of magic, religion, and superstition.

<sup>557</sup> Cf. Frake 1961, 1962; Sturtevant 1964.

<sup>558</sup> The literal translation of the French *sauvage* is 'wild, savage'. It was the standard expression used for pre-civilisation forms of human culture, especially those as encountered by West Europeans in the course of their explorations in the context of early European expansion (15-18<sup>th</sup> c. CE). In early anthropology / archaeology, with its evolutionist slant (cf. Bowler 1992), 'savage' became the term (along with 'primitive') for the supposedly lowest, earliest stage of the development of human societies and cultures (a few examples out of numerous others: de Flacourt 1658; Lafitau 1724; Pickering 1840; Angas 1847; Lubbock 1865; de Quatrefages 1884; Cameron 1887; Clodd 1898; Declé 1898; Kidd 1906; Freud 1913 / 1940 / 1918; Malinowski 1926; Richards 1932). The latter two references are to anthropologists who belonged to the best of their generation – it would be slightly anachronistic to accuse them of racialism in the present-day sense, for when they were writing the time was simply not yet ripe for a critical distance from the hegemonic, subordinating implications of the term 'savage'. For a critical approach, cf. Amselle 1979. Lévi-Strauss was neither an evolutionist nor a racialist (Lévi-Strauss 1952), he (wrongly, but that is not the point) held his rationalistic approach to human thought (*as binary opposition* considered to be absolutely constitutive of human culture) universally valid; therefore I am inclined to translate his 'sauvage' (which was rendered as 'savage' in the English translation of his book in question, 1973 – while the Dutch translation retained the transparent term 'wild') as 'untutored, illiterate, un-academic'. There can be no doubt about the non-racialist, but universalising, meaning which Lévi-Strauss attached to his term 'savage'; as the blurb of the English translation of *Totemism* (1962) reads:

'the author notes that [ totemism ] has gradually come to be understood not as a distinctive institution, but as a way of thinking which is *as characteristic of our own thinking* as it is of the "primitives" for whom totemism was an integral part of life.' (my italics)

Cf. a title by the modern and celebrated anthropologist Jack Goody: *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977), implicitly building on and critiquing Lévi-Strauss.

valid knowledge about nature, and that which is symbolic wrapping and free variation. In itself the desire to arrive at such a distinction between 'valid knowledge about nature' and 'invalid cultural wrapping' is rather suspect, for such a desire is implicitly based on a number of interculturally *untenable* assumptions:

- the mode of knowing and the format of modern North Atlantic science constitutes
  - an objective touchstone by which all other valid knowledge about nature must be measured – as well as
  - a universal format in which all valid knowledge about nature can be expressed,
  - in such a way that such knowledge about nature as does not fit that format cannot constitute valid knowledge about nature.

On the other hand, from the point of view of the local cultural orientation and the local society, the knowledge contents of an ethno-science, including such valid contents as it may seem to comprise from the viewpoint of Western science, only attain meaningfulness on the basis of their being embedded in the whole, in such a way that the symbolic and societal components are not merely a superfluous fringe but on the contrary constitute an integral part of that knowledge and the latter's validity. This is the first time in this Chapter's argument that we hit on the theme of the subordinating / hegemonic format of North Atlantic science; we shall have to return to this theme repeatedly.

In earlier work<sup>559</sup> Sandra Harding explored the limitations of established North Atlantic science (especially natural science) from a feminist and anti-racist point of view. In an important article published 1996-1997 (Harding 1997), she formulates what may well be the ultimate challenge to such science, by asking the question: 'Is North Atlantic science merely an ethno-science?' In other words,

is also North Atlantic science, *to which we are accustomed to attribute such characteristics as objectivity, rationality and universality on the grounds of what we are inclined to consider its unique internal epistemology* – is also that form of knowledge merely one system of knowledge about nature among many such systems, and is also North Atlantic science so much intertwined with local symbolism, belief and societal knowledge that North Atlantic knowledge does not really deserve the privileged position that is so often accorded to it?

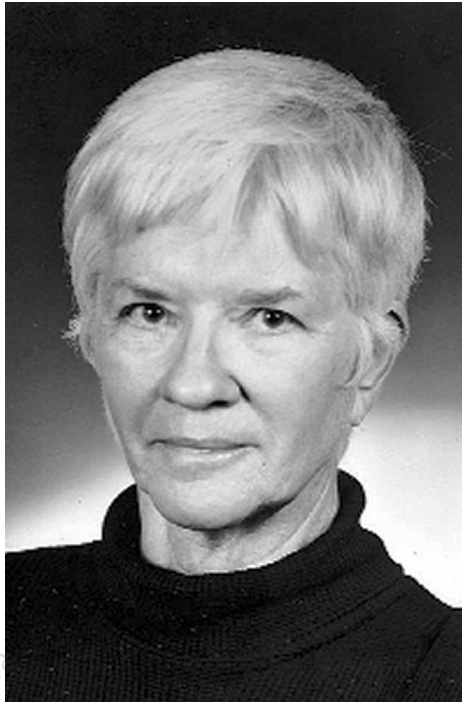
In the first part of this Chapter an extensive critical summary of Harding's own arguments will enable us to identify the many socio-cultural factors in North

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<sup>559</sup> Cf. Harding 1976, 1983, 1986, 1992, 1993, 1994; Harding & O'Barr 1987.

Atlantic science, specifically from three complementary critical perspectives:

- social and cultural science studies as conducted in the North;
- social and cultural science studies as conducted in the South;
- and the feminist perspective.



*Fig. 13.1. Sandra Harding.*

This will enable us to expose, to some extent (but by no means totally) the three classic internal epistemological characteristics on which the superiority claim of North Atlantic science is based (notably: rationality, objectivity, and universality), as hegemonic expressions of Eurocentrism and North Atlantic delusions of superiority. We will seek to identify the social and political processes which have contributed to the appearance of North Atlantic science as rational, objective and universal, especially in the context of European expansion from Early Modern times on. However, we shall also try to follow Harding where she argues that these social and political contingencies, however obvious and important, are